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I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

Luke Wood 27 August 2006
disenchantment/provocation/engagement

Hot Rod Biology

Luke Wood

#2
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An Introduction

The research
The aims and objectives of this research have been on the move—roaming, searching, pitching and shifting—and while for a long time this worried me, in the end I can see that not only was this the right thing to do, it was also inevitable. The subconscious aims and objectives of this research then—stated retroactively ‘here and now’—have been based around some loosely evolving desire to:

1. Reinvent my own practice... to learn to ‘come at’ graphic design differently.

2. Re-enage with graphic design... to open up possibilities and potential that I had previously been unaware of within the domain of graphic design.

After ten years in professional practice I’d become critically bored and had lost all faith in the discipline, or domain’s, ability to offer the kind of complexity and/or provocation I now understand I need in order to have a more engaged and sustainable practice.

This research has been practice-led and project-based. And this has been my first hurdle—coming to terms with how knowledge about practice can emerge from within and around the practice itself. Many of the projects and ideas that form this research should be seen as examples of different attempts to access and articulate what has previously been unconscious and/or implicit within the practice.

The observations—the ‘findings’—of this research have occurred through ongoing reflections of the projects. As such my learning has tended to be articulated in hindsight, and often through writing. Indeed, my discovery of writing as a ‘reflective tool’ within this research has been immensely valuable, and has, in fact, eventually provided me with a new way to approach—to ‘come at’—design.

Within the texts and images I’m presenting here, I hope I am able to show something of the spirit of the shift that has occurred in my practice. While initially the focus of this research was on artefacts and making—the process of designing and its results—it is the ‘spirit’ of my engagement with the discipline and the domain of Graphic Design that ultimately I have attempted to rebuild here.

Perhaps it is not surprising that my practice-led research has actually led to the development of a more personally resonant research-led practice.

Of course, when I think back, I imagine that was probably what I was after in the first instance? And that’s very much how my research has worked... I aim, I miss, I forget about it... and then it shows up at my doorstep a couple of days later.

How to read
I’m telling the story of my research through three common threads that have arisen within and around the projects—disenchantment, provocation, and engagement. Each of these is a chapter within this publication. While they are presented in the guise of a ‘path’ or a trajectory, please be aware that this research has not been so tidy, and these same three ‘threads’ might also be represented thusly:

...with my ‘grand reinvention’ appearing in the middle there like that. More three-ring circus than three-step programme.

(I’m hinting at the fact that there’ll need to be some reading between the lines here.)

Each chapter consists of particular projects from within which the central theme has emerged. Inspired by my reading of Dracula, an epistolary novel, each chapter is made up of combinations of different kinds of texts—pertinent blog entries, abandoned essays, articles I’ve written for other publications, and reflective writing exercises designed specifically for this exegesis. Notes in red are intended to guide the reader, but have also provided further reflection on the research.

As a result, ideas and discoveries will come and go, and reappear again as you read. This is intentional and honest. The epistolary novel was popular for its realism, and like-wise here I’m trying to show this the way it happened... and, in fact, the picture I’m giving you here is far too tidy anyway.
Audience
My desire to show this process as honestly as possible comes from my understanding that there are aspects to its problematic (monstrous) evolution that resonate with other researchers/practitioners. In the sense that my research has largely been about the development and application of reflective practice, I imagine that the initial audience for this work will be other researchers.

There is also a lot here about disenchantment with professional practice though—as a commercially oriented discipline generally relying on the external motivation of a brief, graphic design struggles to sustain provocative practices. And ultimately I hope this research might help show other disenchanted designers both the benefits of, and a way into a more sustaining self-motivated, research-led practice.

Precedents/Trajectory
As the research has moved around so have the existing practices and areas of knowledge I have been looking at and drawing from.

Initially I started out looking at the work of the West Coast American schools from the 1980s and 90s. Specifically I was interested in the American mutation of the ‘Swiss Style’ by the students of Wolfgang Weingart—April Greiman and Dan Friedman. This led me to the later work of Elliot Earls, who influenced a lot of my early formal explorations of ugliness and monstrosity.

While my interest in ‘the cult of the ugly’ eventually waned (after some initial excitement it didn’t seem to be leading me anywhere further), Earls has remained influential in my ongoing research due to the interdisciplinary ‘hybrid’ nature of his practice—his work crossing and erasing boundaries between film, music, performance, and graphic design.

More recently however—as my initial rejection of my Modernist upbringing has cooled, and as the publication project I am involved in has gathered momentum—I have been looking at a trajectory of peculiarly ‘English’ designer/writers. Specifically Herbert Spencer as editor and designer of Typographica, Robin Kinross’ Hyphen Press, and Stuart Bailey, co-editor and designer of Dot Dot Dot.

1. Bram Stoker, Dracula. 1897
2. An epistolary novel is made up of a series of ‘other’ documents like letters, diary entries, and newspaper articles. It first became popular in the 18th century for its heightened sense of realism. Frankenstein and The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde are also largely ‘epistolary’. These texts have influenced this topic conceptually, and their narrative structure seemed appropriate for my own account.
4. See Steven Heller, ‘Cult of the Ugly’ in Eye vol.3, no.9, 1993. [52–59]
5. The National Grid. A copy of issue #1 should accompany this document. For further copies or future issues please visit our website: www.thenationalgrid.co.nz
Chapter 1

Disenchantment

Locating the monster...
Disenchantment > Provocation > Engagement

Looking back over the pot-shots and false-starts that constitute much of my research over the last three years you could be forgiven for initially thinking I haven’t achieved very much at all. Of course I want to show that the opposite is actually true. And I want to begin to do so by suggesting that the very fact that the projects have been ‘all over the place’ is fundamentally important within the (often sub-conscious) aims and objectives of my research.

What I’m getting at here is that I often didn’t know where I was going. But that, in hindsight—precisely because it was divergent and tangential, as opposed to logical and step-by-step—the projects within my research inadvertently sketched out a detailed map of my practice at a specific point in time.

The chart that appears (my map is a monstrous jigsaw puzzle) documents my disenchantment with Graphic Design. The false-starts and unfinished projects begin to make some sense when viewed through this lens—my constant moving about, reading widely, searching for a position... my research has covered a lot of ground.

It worried and upset me. This methodology did not fit with my assumptions about research, or about design.1 On one hand I yearned for a grand ‘Research Question’, a problem to solve, and a logical trajectory. Yet on the other I sort of subconsciously knew—from years of experience—that this wasn’t the type of practice I wanted to develop. So my problem then, was one of dislocation.

Understanding and coming to terms with this dislocation—my disenchantment, and source of distraction—has obviously been a fundamentally important part of my attempt to re-engage with Graphic Design, both practically and ideologically.

Professional practice
Disenchantment is (pervasive?) a common complaint from graphic designers. Generally based on the externally motivated nature of design, it’s easy to blame the briefs, the clients, or the MBA wielding account-manager who is increasingly put between designers and their clients.

And while I am guilty of having made these same complaints, I have come to realise—through this research—that my own disappointment was more complex, deeply ingrained, and personal in nature. Even after almost ten years in the industry it wasn’t that I’d become bored or frustrated by the lack of room to push a brief beyond what was generally expected. I was working at one of NZ’s best studios, and I can’t really blame the jobs, the clients, or the politics of studio. I just didn’t care anymore.

I didn’t care about ‘good’ design, about elegance or making things look pretty, and I didn’t care about other people’s interactions with my work. As a result I was unable to see an interesting future for myself in Graphic Design—further potential or possibility—so I left professional practice and went teaching. But, of course, I struggled with that too—how can you teach something you don’t believe in?

Frame of reference
Through the reflection of this research, I have eventually come to realise that my lack of faith in Graphic Design was largely the result of a perception of the domain that I did not engage with, or aspire to. Initially this was an inherited frame of reference from an ideological Formalist education2—one I knew didn’t quite ‘fit’, but one that I seemed to have real difficulty shaking off.

Having read more widely and looked outside of Design in my research, I have realised how much my frame of reference had been shaped by the discourse most immediately available to me. Following school, my developing perception of Design in general was constructed around the overwhelmingly dominant voices of industry—safety, conservatism, economics, and politics.

My initial engagement with graphic design had been on an ephemeral level and, I should point out, I’ve never had any desire to design signage systems for airports or hospitals. Mostly I’ve designed posters for bands and books for artists. So the central concerns of much graphic design discourse—usability, technical innovation, etc—always seemed more specifically applicable to architectural or industrial design to me.3

I quickly became more interested in reading about art and music. The way these things were discussed seemed to fit more appropriately the way my practice as a graphic designer actually happened.4 There seemed to be more room for speculation, intuition, and self-interest. And so a key development of this practice-led research has been my developing ability to frame up a practice in design around these other—perhaps more marginal—concerns.
Community of practice

It’s impossible to avoid the fact that the disenchantment I have felt around my perception of the discipline/domain has had a lot to do with my inability to locate myself within a like-minded community of practice. As a graphic designer I’ve always tended to work in isolation, and one of the most ‘useful’ things I’ve gotten from this extended period of reflection has been a new appreciation of the value that interaction with others can bring to practice.

Until I began this research towards a Masters at RMIT University in Melbourne my practice had been solely based in New Zealand. And where any graphic design community is understandably going to be dominated by the terms and conditions of industry, this is even more so in an extremely small community such as we have in New Zealand. I’ve never had much respect for the profession as I’ve known and experienced it. And even though (perhaps because of the fact?) I’d taken part in a lot of industry related hoo-ha—judging awards etc—I’ve always felt dislocated from a community of practice.

Through the accidental and unexpected relationships I’ve developed around this research (peripherally), I can now see that a large part of my difficulty in articulating my own particular and abstract interests within Graphic Design has been symptomatic of this actual, and perceived—partly self-imposed—isolation.

Way in

I wanted this chapter to be like a eulogy, or a ‘goodbye’ at least, to the kind of practice I had before... dislocated, flat, conservative, brain-washed, simplistic, unreflective, and disengaged. The work—projects, experiences, and reflections—included here are those I felt most highlighted certain aspects of my disenchantment.

The basis of my proposal here—my ‘thesis’—is largely to do with the potential such a lack of faith actually has to be highly engaging and generative (when articulated and provoked). The trajectory I’m describing here—Disenchantment > Provocation > Engagement—has been fabricated (realised!) in hindsight however, and so the projects will not necessarily be shown chronologically.

Of course this work is highly personal, and one of the discoveries I have made about myself has been my tendency to let my natural pessimism get in the way of my productivity—those false starts I was talking about. I’d like to think that through understanding this—by simply being aware of it—I am now, at least, optimistically cynical.

1. “Design is a process. It is a process whereby a designer, equipped with a technical knowledge of all processes and materials available at the time, and a true understanding of the problems to be solved, and of the constraints that may be imposed upon the solution, together with a sensitive and humanitarian respect for the same, combines these different elements into a cohesive practical whole.” My undergraduate teacher/supervisor, Max Hailstone, in his book Design and Designers. Published by The Griffin Press and NZ Industrial Design Council, 1985.

2. See above, but also my notes on page 24, ‘Modernism vs White Trash’.

3. See Noel Waite’s text ‘The Lay of the Case: Putting New Zealand Communication Design on the Map’ in The National Grid #1, March 2006. Noel touches on the tendency for graphic design discourse to be based on concerns of architectural and industrial design practices.

4. I’m slightly misrepresenting this. I had become aware of alternative voices via publications like Eye (UK) and Emigre (USA). I engaged more readily with Eye magazine, although its journalistic style and preference for historical survey didn’t excite me. Emigre on the other hand, was much more inflammatory and provocative, but always felt overly didactic and a bit evangelical (hard to believe). I always imagined something in between these publications, and then of course I discovered Dot Dot Dot on my first trip to Melbourne to begin this research. Dot Dot Dot has been hugely influential in terms of my developing a new practical frame of reference through my reading around this research.


6. Although my diagonally related practice as a musician has always heavily relied on other peoples involvement.

7. See my ‘Letter to Fraser’, page 29 this chapter.

8. See ‘Other people’ in the introduction to chapter 3, Engagement.
Self-portrait as monster (‘Designwolf’). Digital photograph, February 2006.
Last night I went to see Bruce Mau talk. I assumed it’d be a portfolio show, a chronological ‘how I got to be where I am now’ kind of thing, but it wasn’t, thankfully, and he mainly talked about his latest project ‘Massive Change’. I’d seen the book around and I’d flicked through it a couple of times but it hadn’t engaged me, either in its content or its design, and I’d left it on the shelf. In the book, and on the stage, Bruce makes it very clear; he wants to save the world. Not surprisingly ‘innovation’ is what designers have to offer in the race to save the world, and the term was thrown around in relation to all sorts of things from new, more open and collaborative business models for design studios, to the problem of New York’s yellow cabs, urban planning, international economies, and—of course—the multi-gazillion dollar question in America right now, New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta. While these are certainly prescient issues—problems to be solved—I was struck by the same feeling I’d had when I was leafing through the book. Boredom. But boredom offset by some kind of anxiety, guilt I guess, that I should care. Sitting in an auditorium with maybe a couple of hundred other designers who, for all intents and purposes did seem to care, I began to feel like a phoney, and I wondered if people could tell. It felt a lot like the couple of times I’ve been dragged along to a church service and become paranoid that everyone there knew just by looking at me that I was an unbeliever.

...
February 11, 2006

**Bad Design (Unbeliever)**

Last week I went to an expensive Manhattan 'Design Store' (Moto in Soho) with Ange. It was interesting because I mean I'm a 'Designer', and I'm in a design store, and I absolutely cannot fucking stand it. I'm sorry if this reads a bit teen-angsty, obviously I'm too old for that, but there's nothing I like about it... the products, the store, the staff's uniforms... nothing. Of course I thought about how I've said, usually as a joke, that my research is about 'Bad Design'... and about how, being there in that space, I felt like a monster. I thought about something I'd written when I first got here for an article I was going to write about innovation for The National Grid...)

"Last night I went to see Bruce Mau talk. I assumed I'd be a portfolio show, a chronological 'how I got to be where I am now' kind of thing, but it wasn't,thankfully, and he really talked about his latest project 'Massive Change'. I'd seen the book around and I'd flicked through it a couple of times but it hadn't engaged me, either in its content or its design, and I'd left it on the shelf. In the book, and on the stage, Bruce makes it very clear: he wants to save the world. Not surprisingly 'innovation' is what designers have to offer in the race to save the world, and the term was thrown around in relation to all sorts of things from now, more open and collaborative business models for design studios, to the problem of New York's yellow cabs, urban planning, international economics, and - of course - the multi-billion dollar question in America right now, New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta. While these are certainly present issues - problems to be solved - I was struck by the same feeling I'd had when I was testing through the book. Boredom. But boredom offset by some kind of anxiety, guilt I guess, that I should care. Sitting in an auditorium with maybe a couple of hundred other designers who, for all intents and purposes did seem to care, I began to feel like a phony, and I wondered if people could tell. It felt a bit like the couple of times I've been dragged along to a church service and become paranoid that everyone there knew just by looking at me that I was an unbeliever."

I tried to relate this back into my topic....
Dear Hamish,

Of all the letters I’ve been trying to write lately this is easily the hardest. Our relationship has a lot of complexity because we’ve known each other for a long time now, and the dynamics of the relationship have shifted over that time. Maybe I should just start with some obvious statements? And I should be honest with you — I’m sort of hoping this will be both an illuminating and cathartic exercise — I’m describing the breakdown in our relationship because I think it says a lot about my loss of faith in design.

Phase 1. For a long time I really looked up to you. As a 15 year old boy thinking about what to do with my life, you represented something worth aspiring to — something about your absolute commitment to what it was you were doing appealed to me immensely. This sort of attitude was quite new to me. Your commitment to the art of design rather than the money also struck a chord. Your bad moods made sense because, as you pointed out, everything was designed so poorly, and the world could easily have been a more beautiful place. If only people would “consider the details” and act “more appropriately”.

A few years later, when I’d finished art school, I really hoped you’d offer me a job at your studio. I was scared to show you the work I’d done at school though — I had a feeling you wouldn’t approve. Anyway I was far too nervous (admiration?) to just come out and ask if I might come and work with you. But then of course Max died, you took over the course at Canterbury, and I got a job at the art gallery in Hamilton anyway.

Phase 2. Some years later still, when I was living in Wellington, you asked me if I’d come and talk to your students. You’d seen some of the work I’d been doing, and of course I was very pleased that you thought enough of it to ask me to show it to your students. I came, I talked... and it was the beginning of the next phase in our relationship. This was, I think, the start of our relating to each other as equals? This isn’t completely true because you were always more sure of yourself and, to be honest, you still scared me a bit. Anyway, two key things happened as a result this; a. we started discussing the idea of working on a publication together, and b. about a year later you invited me down to take your position at the university while you were away on a years study leave.

The publication we talked about was The National Grid. I’d had the idea for a while of doing this low-fi graphic design fanzine, and you were keen to be involved, to help get it off the ground, only you thought it should be a bit more hi-fi and pragmatic. Three or four years later I’ve finally published the first issue of The National Grid, but with someone else, as you know. You sounded quite offended (upset?) in the very brief email you sent me when you saw issue #1, and this is a good intro to the third, and current, phase of our relationship.

Phase 3. This is really why I’m writing this letter. And the letter seems so appropriate because of the communication breakdown between us in this phase. Most of the following will be based on speculation because we haven’t talked in ages, but mostly what I’m wanting to do here is describe...
the change I think my practice has gone through, the role you’ve sort of unwittingly played in that, and why I think it is that we don’t talk anymore.

As I’ve said I’d really looked up to you. You’d sent me off to the same school you’d studied design at, and I ended up learning from the same charismatic Englishman who’d taught you. But that was sort of where the fracture began, because I knew you really looked up to him, but I didn’t really ‘click’ with him at all. He was very much what you’d call a Modernist of the old guard. Our points of reference were all from 1950s Swiss graphic design; Muller-Brockmann, Gerstner, Weingart… although anyone from Herbert Spencer’s ‘Pioneers of Modern Typography’ was acceptable. Tschichold’s first book was good, and structuralist semiotics were imperative. He was a Formalist, and very dogmatic, and even though I didn’t really engage with a lot of this initially, I began to believe that this was what real (read ‘useful’, ‘valuable’) graphic design was... and of course it really illuminated your practice for me.

For roughly the next eight years, however, I struggled to use what I’d learnt to find a position or a ‘practice’ that I could really engage with. I’d gotten very good at aping the aesthetics of those utopian Modernist forbears, but it felt pretty hollow and meaningless within the framework of the uses I could put it to. Slowly but surely I became more and more disenchanted with graphic design. I wasn’t seeing any work I liked, and I’d begun to think that graphic design and ‘graphic designers’ were a bit trite. I’d been hanging out mostly with artists and musicians, and I enjoyed their company more. In hindsight I can see that the publication I’d been glibly proposing was possibly motivated by my lack of enthusiasm, and some subconscious belief that there could be more to graphic design that what I was currently experiencing (although I admit I didn’t give it a lot of thought at the time).

I’d discussed it, The National Grid, with a number of people, most significantly an art history/theory lecturer I worked with in Hamilton, before I mentioned it to you. I realised I’d never be able to do it on my own, and I probably imagined it’d never happen anyway, but when I talked to you about it, suddenly you made it sound possible. You talked about funding and sponsorship etc, and I could sort of see it taking shape on the horizon somewhere. That was all good enough, and we continued these loosely pragmatic conversations via email.

The change – the breakdown! – occurred when we started to talk about possible content. It became apparent pretty quickly that we were interested in very different things. You wanted to critique things formally, and were talking about articles on the correct usage on hyphens, en-, and em-dashes. You wanted to make ‘the rules’ known, whereas I was imagining vaguely poetic ramblings about vernacular fish-and-chip shop signage from provincial New Zealand. We were obviously coming at this – graphic design – from different angles now, but I liked the idea that the publication could contain very different voices, and I kept trying to work with you.

Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on how you look at it?) our differences in opinion about content had surfaced shortly before I was to arrive in Christchurch to take charge of the course you’d been running at Canterbury University. And where I was still sort of interested in working with you, you kind of just stopped talking to me. The weirdness of which was compounded by the fact that I was to be taking ‘your’ course for a year.

This was obviously a real struggle for me – to teach ‘Hamish’ projects. They were basically exactly the same projects we’d done as students there.
years ago – the same ones I’d had a problem with then… how the hell was I to ‘teach’ them now? This coupled with the fact that I was very disenchanted with graphic design in general, and in some respects just didn’t even believe in it anymore. The fact was I just didn’t care so much about the correct use of hyphens, en-, and em-dashes. So setting out on such projects with the students at the beginning of the year, I quickly realised that I wasn’t going to be very useful (inspirational?) to anybody doing this kind of study.

I know you see graphic design as a science rather than an art. You believe design exists to solve problems and to improve the world around us. And your teaching style and values reflected those beliefs through the kinds of projects that you set – typefaces for dyslexics, signage systems for public transport, that sort of thing. You knew what the required outcome of a project would be, so you had strict guidelines as to the correct process to be followed – 1. brief, 2. data collection, 3. analysis/synthesis, 4. solution. And you taught them well… (I could never get any of your students to respond intuitively to each other let alone a project).

Inevitably I began to try writing/setting my own projects. Of course I struggled initially, because I was unable to articulate a practice of my own. All I really knew was that I didn’t engage with design in the way that you were teaching it. I’ve since tried ‘opening up’ the course by introducing self-initiated components. And rather than lecturing students on ‘the rules’ of typography, I just tend to let them loose on something and help them through a process of self-discovery… you’d be surprised how many of them have gotten very good at setting type beautifully based on their own evolving common sense!

You believe it’s necessary to ‘direct’ a student’s learning, whereas I tend to want to provide a rough guide. And this obviously says a lot about the difference between us. I guess it comes back to the way we see design. You see it as a science – quantitative and analytical, and I see it as an art – speculative and contestable.

Anyway, initially we were still in contact, although only very occasionally, and only via email. When word got back to you though (through your loyal students), about what I was up to at school, that was it – the end of our relationship. I haven’t heard from you since, except for that very brief and nasty email about The National Grid. That didn’t bother me though because I didn’t expect you’d like it. I’ve begun to realise the nature of our differences, and also because I know you more or less, I can understand your vitriolic response to the publication.

As I mentioned I’m really writing this letter for myself – a reflective exercise to try and understand my lack of engagement with the kind of practice that you represent so well. If, however, after reading this, you’d be interested in replying, I’d actually be keen to hear from you?

Cheers,

Luke Wood
1.1 THE VERY BEGINNING...
This was the very first ‘thing’ I did within this Masters. It was done before my first trip to Melbourne, and was partly a way for us all to get to know each others practices, but mainly it was what Lisa called a “Generative Exercise”... where we had to collect 100 images. I found this really difficult at the time because I didn’t have a “topic” pinned down, Lisa said it didn’t matter, but it meant that it was really hard for me to curate a cohesive bunch of images. In hindsight I see, right here on my wall, the seeds of my desire to actually do a Masters in the first place. This eclectic collection of photocopied images, loose ends that I sweated over trying to connect... (I don’t have an image of it, but when I finally had 100 images on the wall I got this blue string and some drawing pins and tried to connect the dots!!?). To me this is an image of a crisis... a not knowing what the fuck to do with yourself kind of crisis. One prefigured/predated by an enrollment in architecture at Auckland Uni, a vague and very loose attempt/idea of making art, or becoming an ‘artist’, beginning to play music again after 8 years of having “given up”, and also giving up my job as a graphic designer to go teaching for a year. Basically I was bored... and that was/is important.

1.2 HOT ROD BIOLOGY...
This is what the collected images eventually turned into... a 300 page book I called ‘Hot Rod Biology’. Without getting too in-depth, it was supposed to be a kind of hybrid publication, half biology text book and half hot rod magazine, connected through a shared interest taxonomy. My images were really diverse, from family photos dating back to the very early 20th century, to minimalist record covers by Peter Saville, books I’d read as a teenager, cars I’d owned, Josef Muller-Brockmann posters, and pictures of my girlfriend wearing bikinis and an Elvis mask.

I should point out that I HAD to do this project. It was part of the requirements for the Research Methods paper I had to do at RMIT. I point this out because at the time I really hated it. While I became quite obsessed by it I could never quite get my head around what I was doing and/or what I was going to get out of it... and I worried that when I eventually had to show it in Melbourne everyone would just think I was self-obsessed... and certainly didn’t have a research topic. I was so embarrassed by what I’d made that I actually didn’t show it or talk about it in my first GRC.

But when I finally did show it to Lisa and my other research-mates I was surprised to find they actually liked what I’d done. Of course I worried that they were reading things into it that I hadn’t intended, and then of course they were, but then of course I now realise that that was the point... kind of. I was especially surprised when Lisa took it to her interview at Parsons and got really good feedback about the book there. As I’m currently actually in New York for a couple of months, Lisa has recently introduced me to Ted, the guy from Parsons who was so smitten with the book.

I’ve been disappointed I didn’t bring it. It seems so important now, and I think one the “things-I-know-now-that-I-didn’t-know-before” might have something to do with my ability to look at this project as ultimately ‘successful’. What I want to try and point out here is how much this initial exercise unknowingly informed the direction of my research, and how aspects of it have resurfaced as projects within the later stages of this Masters. I also want to show how, through this research, I’m not bored anymore and that I love graphic design again.
Modernism vs White Trash

While at the time I wasn’t specifically focusing on a sense of disenchantment, this first project documents what I then saw as a ‘split’ in my personality... and subsequent practice.

I’d struggled to come to terms with my Modernist education in graphic design, but—eventually—I’d come to love and respect the ‘Masters’ of Modern typography.¹

‘Real’ graphic design was invisible, stripped to it’s essentials the reader/audience should not notice anything but the content. Any form-giving would be appropriate to the content, and any decoration should be avoided. Typefaces should never be mixed, and Helvetica or Akzidenz Grotesque was the default in any circumstance. The Grid was almighty.² And legibility—the ‘reading condition’—was the basis of any decision.³

I came to believe (more or less unquestioningly) in ideas like these. And it was in this state of mind that I entered into professional practice. You might call that ‘Zombie Modernism’.⁴ I worked this way for a quite a while.

But...

this wasn’t where my interest in design had originated from. And while I was able—eventually willing—to adapt, the ideas and images of European Modernism had little in common with my own background in small-town New Zealand. I’d grown up around farming, heavy drinking, big cars, and loud music.⁵

My initial interest in graphic design (although I didn’t know what that was for a long time) developed through a love of fairly mundane things; comics, magazines, lolly wrappers, record covers.

As my disenchantment with professional practice grew, I sort of blamed Modernism (really I was blaming my education though) and I became quite nostalgic for the days where I enjoyed copying car badges and band logos onto the covers of my school books. I wished I could be naive again? I began to lose interest in ‘good’ design. Basically I was bored with grids and Helvetica, and vernacular design seemed to be lot richer and infinitely more honest to me.

The problem here—or so I thought at the time—was that I’d come to believe that these two sorts of practice were incompatible. The ‘real’ problem was perhaps more that I was unable to reflect on the seeming disparity between the things I was interested in and engage with them in a generative way.

This book then, the first ‘Hot Rod Biology’—combining the conventions of the modernist text book with a hot rod magazine—was an attempt to pull these things together in a way that I was trying to describe as hybrid.⁶

I didn’t think it was successful at the time because I was looking for that ‘hybridity’—a new aesthetic I think?—which never arrived. Less consciously, however—and more valuably in hindsight—this project began to map, and thereby illuminate aspects of my disenchantment with graphic design.

It’s full of unanswered questions, but—reciprocally—all my subsequent projects point back to this one.

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1. Jan Tschichold, Max Bill, Joseph Muller-Brockmann, Karl Gerstner, et al. Even though I was at design school in the 1990s Wolfgang Weingart was presented to us as a ‘radical’. Weingart even came to visit. The fact that Weingart’s students—A pril Greiman and Dan Friedman in particular—had taken his ideas back to West Coast American schools, where they’d mutated into something else entirely, was completely unknown to me.

2. See Josef Muller-Brockmann’s Grid Systems for Graphic Design.

3. Herbert Spencer’s The Visible Word was our bible here.

4. Initially Jeffery Keedy, ‘Zombie Modernism’ in Emigre 34, Spring 1995. But more recently Mark Owens, ‘Graphics Incognito’ in Dot Dot Dot 12, 2006. Interestingly Owens “reclals” the idea of zombie modernism as a potentially generative and complex strategy in graphic design. Obviously I like that idea because it fits into my own interests around monstrosity. I should also point out that if Dot Dot Dot has any sort of mandate then it might be a re-evaluation, or re-appreciation of Modernism. And that, in some ways, they’ve sort of got me believing in it again.

5. There was a mixture of different styles of music—my grandfather listened to Elvis all the time, my grandmother liked Country and Western (Loretta Lynn, Patsy Cline), my father was more Folk-Rock (Neil Young), and my uncles were all into late 70s/early 80s Heavy Metal (AC/DC, Led Zeppelin, Iron Maiden, and Mоторhead). The one thing all these types of music have in common (apart from Neil Young perhaps?) is that they’re all very ‘lower-class’. No one in my family listened to Classical music or Opera... which sort of illustrates the point. I’m trying to make here.

6. I had seen and read about the work that had been done by students and staff at both Cranbrook and Cal Arts in the late 1990s, but I’d never dabbled in that kind of stuff. I’d read Emigre a lot when I discovered it, and where I’d liked the ideas/discourse I hadn’t really engaged with the work it reproduced or represented. This project, through its ‘hybrid’ motivation, could be seen as a beginning to work within that West Coast trajectory—a sort of ‘trying on for size’.

2004

Designers Institute of New Zealand Design Awards

Best

Judge of the Best Design Awards

Graphic Design

Luke Wood

Thank you for supporting the best of the best 2004.
Dear Fraser,

I’ve been meaning to get in touch for a while now, as I’ve been thinking a lot about the judging process you invited me to take part in a couple of years ago. I know you thought that I was a bit annoying – constantly arguing, and holding up the process – and I wanted to try and explain why I was frustrated, and eventually disappointed by it. But also – on a happier note – I want to let you know that being involved in this process was, in hindsight, quite educational and valuable for me.

Mostly this is to do with the palpable peripheral nature of my contribution, and my not really understanding the significance or character of this difference. I’ve been wondering why and how was I chosen to be a part of the exercise? It certainly occurred to me as being strange at the time – I was honestly surprised (flattered!) to be asked. But as time has passed, and I’ve thought about this momentary experience a lot more, this question has been really ringing in my head. Why me? What did you expect?

My question is motivated by the fact that I was an obvious ‘odd ball’ – a bit of a freak really (am I being a bit sensitive?). The other judges were all owners of relatively successful studios, who showed up in flash cars with expensive watches, TV smiles, and heavily laden appointment diaries. I, by comparison, had recently quit professional practice and gone teaching as a way to make some money while I tried to figure out how to get the hell OUT of graphic design. I drove a Lada station wagon that cost $500 and couldn’t get a warrant.

Obviously a large amount of my frustration was due to the fact that I just didn’t get along with the other judges. Which sounds childish I know, but which has also been very illuminating in the respect that I was forced to begin to think about why that was. We couldn’t have been more different. And maybe that was the point? You wanted someone like me in the mix to ‘even it out’, to provide a different point-of-view?

This makes perfect sense of course. But the problem then, was that there was only one of me and five of them. And being that we could never agree on anything, you would always call a vote – and the vote would always be 5 to 1. So I would always just end up feeling useless, and that my inclusion in the process was pointless… or some sort of token gesture (to what I don’t know?).

Anyway, partly I’m writing to have a whinge. That is true. But also, I’m wanting to say that some good did come of this, and that it was somehow a result of that illumination of difference. I mean we were all supposed to be ‘Graphic Designers’, yet we had absolutely nothing in common as far as I could tell? How could we be seeing the same things, experiencing them, and talking about them so fundamentally differently, when we all supposedly shared in the same discipline/domain? Maybe I sounded like a jerk when I described them earlier, but I’m just trying to figure out why we so clearly don’t aspire to the same things? (In some ways I left quite ‘happy’ to be the bumbling loser with the crappy car. The experience certainly didn’t inspire me to move to Auckland and take a high-paying job at a large
I’m also alluding to a concern that my own interests seemed to be entirely marginal in relation to those of the other judges. I’ll see if I can explain...

I was quite happy to be subjective and opinionated. I was looking for work that I thought was disruptive and/or delightful... work that engaged ME as a designer. They – ‘they’ – were horrified when I said this, and insisted on lecturing me about how we had to try to be objective and assess how well the job had “met the brief”, or “solved the clients problems”, etc. Yet when I asked them how they did that I found they all had different and unsatisfactory answers, and so I suggested that they were actually being just as subjective as me, only they weren’t being honest about it. They’d all point to ‘craft’ as some sort of defining quality, but I didn’t care much about formal elegance, so that didn’t help (you can see how our cars work as an analogy there).

To some extent I should have expected this. And to be honest with you I’ve never really liked other graphic designers. But still I really was quite surprised by the fact that we (me and them) were actually talking about COMPLETELY different things. Where they were looking for market-research, simplicity, and safety – I was looking for resonance, complexity, and provocation! They wanted visual puns and one-liners, whereas I wanted for some sort of referential density.

And this is what I meant about that ‘illumination’ before – the idea that this experience (or my reflecting on it) began to shed some light on my disenchantment with professional practice, and my inability to engage with ‘the industry’.

There’s two inter-related parts to this I think? Firstly there’s an obvious disparity between those terms and conditions – the words we use, the way we speak, and how that shapes the way we see and evaluate things. But the second, BIGGER thing, I think, was the slowly evolving realisation that this was/is THE community of practice... in New Zealand. Of course the small size of that community means it is dominated by industry whose interests are, understandably, primarily commercial. As a result however, alternative voices (and I’ve been discovering that we do have some!) have existed in relative isolation to one another — dislocated and disconnected.

I’ve spent a lot of time recently thinking about the character and significance of the periphery, of those marginal voices – how imagination, innovation, and invention are almost always entirely marginal anyway, and how the centre sort of ‘feeds’ on the periphery in most cases. Perhaps that sounds arrogant, but I certainly think it’s true of creative practices in general, don’t you?

Anyway, to bring this to a close I want to tell you about the ‘good thing’ that came out of all of this. In fact I’m including a copy of it with this letter...

The National Grid is a publication I’ve set up (collaboratively with another graphic designer, Jonty Valentine) that aims to address the stuff I’ve been waxing on about here... to begin to build/connect a community of marginal characters (your monsters?), to document peripheral practices (those who would never win your awards), and to acknowledge the importance of tension and dissent within the community. We’re very much making it up and figuring it out as we go – issue #2 already looks like it’ll be a big improvement on #1. Anyway, let me know what you think? If ever you’d be
interested in contributing to it please just submit an abstract via our website — www.thenationalgrid.co.nz

Cheers,

[Signature]

Luke Wood
Learning from distraction [part 1]

The loudest and most obvious indication of my disenchantment with graphic design that continually appears throughout these projects is my pre-occupation with—actually preference for—making music.

Many of my ideas for projects contained somewhat strained attempts at ‘putting’ music into them, either as content or outcome.

I came up with lots of different reasons and/or excuses for this but basically, as I’d become less engaged by my experiences in design, I’d gone back to playing music because it was fun.

“I just wish design could be as much fun as playing in a band.”1

At the time I thought music could offer me more in terms of ‘surprise’—improvisation, the unexpected, the excitement of live performance—and I set about trying to introduce greater degrees of chance and unpredictability into my work in graphic design.2

In hindsight, this was a mistake (sort of).

I wanted to ‘make’ my practice as a graphic designer more ‘like’ my practice as a musician—I’d been doing this by looking at the forms and processes of one, and then trying to apply them to the other.

What emerged however was the slow realisation that these forms and processes were more similar than I’d first thought.

The question then—what’s different?

Out on the periphery of my immediate tendency to focus on artefacts and ways of making, was the slowly occurring realisation that one important thing I was getting from music that I wasn’t from design, was a like-minded community that I could engage with.

I’m talking about company and conversation here.

Collaboration3 is a part of this, but it’s not really the point I’m trying to make here.

My ‘point’ is that company and conversation are important generative factors for any sort of engaged and sustainable practice.

It sounds so obvious. And, again, the answer was right there in front of me.

There all the time, but hard to see.

This realisation about community was amplified by my moving to New York for 6 months where I tried (unsuccessfully) to put a band together. The image below is of a poster I put up around Brooklyn to try and find a drummer—see page 121.

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1. This was Holden Gunn’s last line—intentionally naive—in a low-fi DVD I made called Inviting The Monster. This 20 minute movie opened and closed with performances by the band I was in at the time.

2. Aspects of this are covered in more detail in my second chapter here, Provocation.

3. Until fairly recently I hadn’t ever collaborated with another designer on anything. The collaborative project I’m currently involved in is covered in more detail in my third and final chapter on Engagement.
Collaboration and The Exquisite Corpse

This is my good friend Oscar Guzman up at my band room last Sunday. We played in a band together about 10 years ago and haven't really played any music together since. While our musical tastes and interests certainly overlap we're also both interested in quite different things. We got together on Sunday specifically to do some recording (The Hi-Aces still don't have a drummer and I've been trying to do 'something').

I'd been thinking about the surrealistic 'Exquisite Corpse' game for a while in relation to my topic ... when I was young my friends and I would draw superheroes and monsters and shit like that. So, basically because we only had one set of headphones, Oscar and I kind of did the same thing in terms of constructing a piece of music. It wasn't quite the same as we weren't doing it 'blind' as such, but rather I'd record a bit, pass it over to Oscar, he'd record a bit, etc etc.

The result was certainly something 'unexpected' though. I played my usual twangy-surf-country stuff, but Oscar put in this really low-dry-muffled guitar sound with a kind of myrrhin I would never have come up with. While I was surprised, I certainly didn't scare myself at any point through ... I guess I quite liked the result.

I'm interested in trying to define whether it is 'boiling' myself exactly that I'm interested in. I guess the term 'unexpected' contains the 'scare' but not everything that's unexpected is scary ... do I want to be surprised or scared?

Posted by Luke Wood at November 11, 2004 12:51 PM
April 19, 2005

The Grand Saloon

We played our first gig as The Grand Saloon on Saturday night. It was a big hit. We completely packed out the Wunderbar, and had everybody up dancing around like crazy. I had the show timed and we recorded it to DAT... I'm hoping to review it and try and figure out once and for all how (if?) the band (or just perhaps music) might fit into my research topic. I guess I'm ready for it not to, but am more and more into the idea that my theorising (my topic) come from my 'existing' practice...

Posted by Luke Wood at April 19, 2005 03:20 PM

The footage referred to in the entry above was included as part of a 20 minute movie I made called 'Inviting The Monster'. See chapter 2, Provocation, pages 69-72.

Right: The final chapter of the first Hot Rod Biology book was a 'Manifesto for The Hybrid Practitioner'. This manifesto includes a number of early visual cues to my interests in the space between my previously disparate practices as a graphic designer and as a musician. This manifesto is reproduced in full starting on page 111.
A "MANIFESTO" FOR "The Hybrid Practitioner"

1. "The Hybrid Practitioner" as a response to the need for new forms of creativity and collaboration in the digital age. It emphasizes the importance of embracing technology and digital tools to enhance artistic expression.

2. "The Hybrid Practitioner" as a model for interdisciplinary work, combining elements of art, design, and technology to create innovative solutions.

3. "The Hybrid Practitioner" as a critique of the traditional art world, advocating for a more inclusive and accessible approach to art making and dissemination.

NEVER MIND THE BOLLOCKS

HERE'S THE END BEGINNING!
I’ve always struggled to find studios I’ve wanted to work in.

Apart from the fact that I haven’t ever gotten on very well with other graphic designers, I’ve also never really liked the studio environments they tend to inhabit.

To be honest with you I’ve only ever worked for a ‘real’ studio for about three years over the last decade.

I can’t stand those pseudo-modernist corporate interiors: white with a ‘feature-wall’, steel and glass, a designer chair or two, carefully placed, but that no one ever sits in.

Despite being an otherwise stereotypical Virgo, I like a bit of clutter. I like having ‘stuff’ around me, I like to make a mess, and I like to work with my hands.

My ideal studio would be like a well stocked band-room, a bit run down, dimly lit, packed full of old (pre-digital) equipment.

I’ve never been very interested in computers or new technology—the first thing I did when I quit full-time professional practice was give away my cell phone.

About six months after I’d made the book I’m showing you here I took a trip and spent a couple of weeks at one of the oldest operational (wood-type) letterpress printers in the world.¹

I’d gone there in search of an aesthetic—nostalgia—but what interested me most once I arrived was just how much nicer it was to be in that environment.

You might have a museum in mind, but it wasn’t like that at all. It was a fully functional jobbing print workshop—constantly busy.

To be moving around, standing up—it was a nice change to designing sitting in front of a computer.

Which reminds me...

my favourite part of this first Hot Rod Biology book was actually the manifesto I made for the final chapter. I’d been planning to write one, but I was running out of time. I’d been doing a lot of reading though and I had a lot of references—so in the end I just photocopied the important bits and cut and pasted them together by hand (see over page).

Of course this made perfect sense—it was about appropriation and hybridisation afterall.²

But my point here is really just my various inter-related efforts to get away from the computer... and the studio.

¹ Hatch Show Print, Nashville, Tennessee. I visited Hatch in December 2004. At the time I struggled to pretend that it had anything to do with my research. In hindsight it appears to be a pertinent illustration of some of the things that I was so unhappy with about my practice in graphic design.

² This manifesto, ‘A Manifesto for the Hybrid Practitioner’, is discussed and reproduced in full in chapter 2, Provocation.
Neue Grafik
New Graphic Design
Graphisme actuel

1

[Image: Images of graphic design and photography]
February 22, 2006

Damsel in distress...

That's me and that's my friend George. She's a graphic designer too, and we used to work together in Wellington. A while after I moved to Christchurch George moved to New York. I stayed with her for my first couple of months here and obviously we ended up talking about design a bit... I hope she doesn't mind me saying this here, but she hates her job. Pretty quickly after I arrived I began to see George as a good potential test case for my (admittedly vague) ideas about a 'generative practice'... the idea that my search to reinvent/reinvigorate my own practice might translate into something useful for someone else. The question I think this image poses is "how the hell is this guy gonna be helping anyone?"...
Dear Neil,

I’ve been trying to write to a whole bunch of people as part of some strange cathartic exercise to do with my masters research, and I realised I should definitely drop you a line!

I’ll keep this brief – I think it’s fairly simple? Basically I just want to apologise really, about my behaviour when I worked for you... and let you know that I can sort of understand now that the problems I had working at the studio were more to do with my own romantic and over-blown expectations than anything to do with the work, clients, or time-frames etc.

As you well know I wasn’t very happy at the studio, and partly – I’ve realised since leaving – this was environmental. When I left I went teaching, and while I’ve struggled with that, I’ve really enjoyed not being stuck in front of a computer all day, every day. I’ve told you about my trip to Nashville to work at the old letterpress workshop? — it was so great to be able to move about, work with my hands, and make a mess! But the other thing I’ve discovered is that I quite like to talk about design... why I’ve begun, surprisingly, to like teaching I guess? And I have to say this was something that was really missing from the studio environment – for me anyway (I know some of the girls ’talked’... but not really ever about design, more about their shoes and hair etc).

I know I always took too long on projects, and was sometimes rude to clients (and other staff?), but what I’m trying to explain here is that I didn’t understand or respect the nature of the difference between the requirements of the studio, and my own more personal wants/needs. I really want you to know that in hindsight I can see that the studio you ran was really a very good one (I can’t imagine having worked anywhere else in NZ actually). But that I’ve realised a ‘studio’ is not the best place for me to be practising. Of course you probably already knew that! And so did I, kind of. But of course I was worried that I was in the wrong profession/discipline and thought I should try doing something else entirely.

Which brings me back to those expectations of mine. What the hell do I mean? Basically I’m just talking about the fact that I don’t really care for ‘solving clients problems’ and having a company car and all that kind of stuff. I’ve realised that I’m sort of much more interested in what goes on in the margins of graphic design – I’m interested in the things that don’t work so well, in writing (thinking), and in developing self-initiated research projects – none of which, obviously, are particularly financially sustainable.

These sorts of projects, in tandem with my current teaching position, keep me moving... cognitively and physically. I really like that I get to work in all sorts of different environments now – from talking in the class-room, to working in my own studio, to writing to you now from the dinner table at home. I’ve also been able to travel a lot as part of this ‘new’ sort of practice, I’ve been to Melbourne quite a lot for the masters obviously, but I’ve also been to America twice – New York for 6 months!
— and am currently planning a trip to The Netherlands this summer.

I hated being tied down to desk in a studio. And while I thought I’d go back into professional practice when I finished my masters, I don’t think I will anymore. I’ve been working quite hard on carving myself out a practice based in personal inquiry, as opposed to commercial problem-solving.

Obviously the world needs both — I’ll still take on jobs that interest me (for friends?) — and so I just wanted to let you know that I can appreciate that we are generally interested in the same thing — Graphic Design — but that we’re coming at it from quite different perspectives.

I hope things are well in the big smoke... Anna tells me the wedding was great. We’ll have to catch up for a beer next time I’m up...

Cheers,

Luke
**Mapping, Searching...**

Maps appeared in this first Hot Rod Biology book via an interest initially in hybrid languages—those mutant, ‘bastard’ languages that occur at cultural boundaries, or ‘borderlands’.

I was interested in the metaphor of colonisation, but I was only thinking about it in terms of ‘style’ at this point—Elvis was, I thought, a good example. I liked that generally Elvis was seen as being sort of evil for having appropriated a form (style) of music that wasn’t his. I prefer the idea that everything is up for grabs—“all art is theft”—everything is available to be put together in new and unexpected ways.

I was interested in the connections between the things I liked—records especially—the idea that none of it was ‘new’, just a mutation of something old. I thought I could discover something new (exciting) by delving into my own nostalgia and trying to bastardise the things I loved...

Maps appeared again later on in my research (see chapter 2)... initially as a convention that I wanted to disrupt, to ‘make monstrous’... but then, more unexpectedly, as vague attempts to map my practice.

Looking back these various maps all point to a desire to ‘relocate’ my practice—each one containing certain particular observations about the practice I’d had and a different sort of practice that was appearing on the horizon...

Funnily enough I’ve ended up travelling a lot during this research, and I want to attribute much my eventual re-engagement with design to this. I’ve worked hard to ‘search out’ a new practice for myself—new ways of making, of thinking, and of coming at design, and—probably most importantly—new people and places.

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That’s me outside Sun Records in Memphis, Tennessee, where Elvis made his first recordings. At the time this felt like a long shot... the pilgrimage to Memphis I mean, and that it had anything to do with my research.

Right: ‘Map of Practice’ #2. This map is of particular interest to me now as it charted people—known and unknown—who I felt had influenced my practice as a graphic designer. Strangely prophetic, this map includes certain ‘important’ people who I hadn’t ever met at the time, but who have now more-or-less become friends—see page 107.


El Dorado, Colonisation, my first metaphor

We had the old biscuit box sitting on a shelf behind me for about a year now. Anna gave it to me last year with a collection of small 'biscuit' notes. I've been looking at old maps, one 'The World by John Speed, 1627' I'd scanned in and planned to use because I thought I'd bought it from a second hand store with Anna when we first met. Apparently I was wrong though, it must have been the girl I was asking previously? Anyway obviously the El Dorado biscuit box took on some new resonance for me in relation to my current research (again!)... old maps, sea monsters, conquistadors... (maybe I'll also mention that I had a Spanish girlfriend for a long time, and when we lived in Spain together I was quite fascinated by the Conquistadors). Subsequently I've remembered my first trip to Melbourne, and when Keith, Neal, and I went out for dinner with Lisa and she asked us (over a few drinks) to suggest metaphors that we thought described our practices. I was really stumped and didn't give it a shot until the dive back from the restaurant, but my answer was something about ships, travelling by sea, and colonising foreign countries? I think I vaguely remember saying something about enjoying seeing the ships leave, or maybe it was that I felt like I was 'backing' to leave from... I can't quite remember, but I'm always slightly spoilt by that kind of realisation. You think you've moved far away, but you're still there......

I think El Dorado's quite significant here. Searching for something that doesn't exist?

Also I'm really interested in exaggeration in relation to monstrosity, and the operational name of this assortment of biscuits is just too good.

Posted by Luke Wood at September 8, 2005 12:59 PM
In the introduction to this chapter I mentioned that I didn’t really engage with other graphic designers. My friends have always tended to be artists and musicians, and I realise now that a part of my overall disenchantment with graphic design was to do with the way these different disciplines ‘spoke’ about what they did. I felt (and still do) that Design has a tendency to be over-explained and scientific, whereas I enjoyed the more open, speculative, and poetic language of art and music. It seemed like they were allowed to have ‘magic’ but Design wasn’t.
26 July 2006  
20 Sumner Road  
Lyttelton  
New Zealand

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Dear Yoko,

I wanted to take this opportunity to write to you, instead of our usual drunken post-seminar sessions (discussions/arguments?), in the hope of being more articulate, but also with the idea that I might be able to negotiate more accurately exactly what it was about your research that I found so... disenchanting. You know I really appreciate the fact that you’ve always put up an argument for me to try to work against, and obviously while I’m writing to you, I’m talking about my anxiety with 'design research' in general - with attempts to scientificate, the pervasiveness of 'problem-solving', and with the language it gets packaged up in.

I guess that comment I made about you “pouring concrete over the grass” would be a good place to start? I was trying to be provocative, and on your blog I explained that “I thought you were taking something that’s natural, instinctual, and intuitive... like a conversation at a party... and turning it into something logical (hey the weeds won’t grow), and hard. But we need the weeds you know...”.

I don’t think I’ve told you this but my analogy comes from a real-life experience? Years ago now, when I was about thirteen or fourteen, an old man that lived near the school I went to actually did what I’m talking about here. He lived in one of those classic 1950/60s New Zealand State houses – square, sturdy, with a lawn and a rose garden – but he obviously owned it, because one day he just poured concrete over the entire section (it probably took longer than a day really, it was very smooth and well done. It might have been a professional job?). Anyway that comment, made in reference to your research, was initially a nod to the fact that - like the old man pouring concrete over the grass - I didn't understand your research. Or more precisely perhaps, I didn't understand your motivation?

When I made that comment it was somewhat ‘off the cuff’ - not very considered. Ever since though, it’s sort of reverberated around in my head looking for (finding) some extra significance. In hindsight this metaphor seems to illuminate something about my cynicism and/or lack of engagement with so much of the design research that I’ve been exposed to over the last couple of years.

I think one of the things we have in common is that we came to this – an interest in ‘research’ – via some sort of disenchantment with the industry, or with professional practice. We were both looking for (there had to be) something 'more'? And so that term, 'research', sort of carried all this romantic baggage full of new possibilities for greater levels of engagement and for a more fulfilling life!?

Right from the start I struggled though. I was attracted to this idea of 'practice-based research', but I didn’t really know what it meant or how it would work. I struggled to find a problem to solve. I’d been bought up (educated) to believe that’s what research was... problem-solving. But early on I remember something in Peter Downton’s book about how the term ‘research’ had been colonized by Science, and how, reciprocally, other forms of knowledge or knowing had been sort of de-legitimatised. And slowly but surely my research has seen me move further and further away from
problem-solving as a methodology, or as an adjective for what I do.

I want to suggest that this is where our paths split. I want to call you a problem-solver. Although I know you’ll probably disagree, and I’ll admit that to some extent it’s a generalisation. But stick with me and I’ll see if I can explain...

I’ve often said that your research “scares me”, which was sort of amusing because supposedly that was what I was after with my monsters. And I’m sort of thanking you here for helping me find that – locating the sense/source of my anxiety. I was scared that the research you were doing, and the kinds of things it referenced (and therefore appeared to support) were fundamentally opposed to the kind of practice I had been trying to describe/prescribe for myself. I’m talking here about your delving into things like User-Centered Design, Participatory Design, ‘empathetic thinking’, and specifically your references to companies like Ideo (who you know I can’t stand).

Why am I scared? Largely I think because this is what ‘Design Research’ seems to be becoming. A market-driven attempt to demystify the processes of designing – ‘Design Thinking’ I believe it’s being called – so that it can be applied to more ‘innovative’ business plans/models/strategies etc. I know I sound cynical, and I am, but my scepticism isn’t entirely to do with my not seeing the point. More I think it is to do with the pervasiveness of this movement (can we call it that?), and the developing realisation that my interests in design lie somewhere else entirely. So my fear, partly perhaps, is that of being marginalised?

I want to try and state clearly what I think the difference is between you (them) and me. You’re interested in demystifying design – in simplifying, making clear, and improving.

In comparison I’d say I’m interested in re-mystifying design – in adding complexity, in obfuscating, and derailing. And getting back to the concrete/grass analogy – bear in mind that I’m coming at this from ten years within professional practice, where I felt things had gotten too easy for me – the last thing I want is a ‘smoothing out’... I’m more interested in the grass, the mud, and the weeds – Blake’s “crooked road of prophecy” (keep this to yourself, but I want to believe in magic, voodoo, and love at first sight).

You’re also very interested in ‘other people’ – you want to think, or know more about the people you’re designing for. I got this comment off your blog...

“The core value system within my practice revolves around the quality of consideration given to people.”

...and, as such, the problems you’ve set yourself have been based around how to improve the relationships designers have with other people involved in the process of designing.

While the focus of my research has been me – or ‘my’ practice – and ultimately my goal has been self-improvement. I’ve been looking (sideways? backwards?) at my own engagement with a sense or understanding of my own practice, and so I don’t really care about other people’s interactions or experiences with my work in the way that you do.

I do want to point out, however, that I think other people have benefited from my research (through my teaching and writing), but that this has been more of a by-product than an intention/goal. And that this has sort of been a major discovery for me... ‘me’ as a researcher I mean. What I’m getting
at here is the realisation that while my research feels narcissistic and selfish (monstrous!) it’s benefits become explicit through my more-or-less intuitive interactions with other people.

I’ve been wondering lately if this idea – that you can focus your research on your practice; that the project is the practice and vice-versa – might also allude to a more important but subtle difference between our research programs (and how we value them). This might be contentious, and you’ll probably prove me wrong, but I’m going to throw it out there anyway…

I want to call what you do ‘project-based’ and what I do ‘practice-led’. So what I mean is that where my projects were sort of all over the place, unfinished, and abandoned, they left a picture of a certain kind of practice in their wake. Whereas yours all build systematically, one project upon another, until you get to some tangible outcome. So – and I’m generalising again – yours is predominantly prescriptive (how things should be done), whereas mine is more descriptive (how things are done).

But even as I write this I know it’s not true – I’m as interested in the prescription as you are. I have been writing manifestos afterall! But our prescriptions seem very different I think you’d agree? You’re handing out antibiotics to anyone who’ll listen, and I’m staying home taking LSD on my own.

We both liked that Gaver paper on ambiguity though, and obviously our interests overlap somewhere or we wouldn’t even get into these discussions. And I guess I’m willing to concede that I’m not talking about validity here. All I am talking about is my desire/ability to engage with a certain kind of research (the poetic?), and the relative pervasiveness of the other (problem-solving). (Actually, while I liked Gaver’s ideas I didn’t like the way they were written up as a sort of repeatable 10-step program.)

In the end, as usual, it has been this disenchantment – realised with your help – that has provided the provocation that I needed, ironically, to be engaged.

Cheers,

Luke Wood
Chapter 2

Provocation

The monster is put to work...
“Boredom is always counterrevolutionary”¹ but the idea that disenchantment can be highly provocative is certainly not new.²

Disenchantment

Bored by and unhappy with my practice, an important common thread that has emerged within the tangled web of my research has been ‘provocation’. This has operated or occurred in different ways, sometimes quite consciously and sometimes not so. My attempts to provoke myself have often simply built on the fact that I have found this process—practice-led research—extremely provocative in and of itself.

Disrupting the frame

Within this research the agency of provocation has been its ability to disrupt the habits, patterns, and assumptions of the practice. A ‘disruptive reframing’ which has enabled me to begin to reinvent—or redesign³—my practice by pushing at the boundaries which has enabled me to begin to reinvent—or redesign³—my practice by pushing at the boundaries of my (overly) familiar experiences.

Early on I had felt my ‘problem’—the source of my disenchantment—was my inability to surprise myself in my work by the artefacts I made. I was bored, so I thought if I could discover new, more exploratory, processes and aesthetics I might be more excited and engaged. With this in mind I set out to provoke form and process. I tried to hybridise familiar forms, to seek mutations. I tried to make ugly work—monstrosities!—that would test my personal tastes and attitudes, and perhaps open up new possibilities in my making.

Monstrosity

This chapter could (should?) be called ‘Monstrosity’, but it seemed a little too particular, and the active ingredient—the abstract—is provocation. I should point out though that my observations about provocation have came via the metaphor of monstrosity. And the ‘monstrous’ has, for a long time, been central to my research.

The monster first appeared in my desire for the new and unexpected. I’d become tired of elegance—of ‘good’ (slick?) design—and I was interested in the ephemeral, the vernacular, the banal... “the disturbingly commonplace”.⁴ So the monster’s role within cultural narratives as an ugly disturbance of the everyday had some sort of resonant significance.

The monster, in it’s various manifestations, shapes and guises, seemed to represent many of the things I felt I was after; hybridity, mutation, evolution—but most importantly, a “means of thinking otherwise”.⁵ In this respect monstrosity emerged as a tool to illuminate and critique my cynical frame of reference. Where I felt design was preoccupied with safety and mired in the politics of conservatism by day, the monster appeared at night and talked to me about deviance, aberration, fear, and failure. I like the night-time.

Generative metaphor

As a metaphorical manifestation of culture’s fears and/or anxieties the monster can take many forms. The value of monstrosity as a generative metaphor lies within it’s ability to show us something about ourselves that we otherwise could not see, recognise, or understand. Often it is an explicit or particular illustration of some implicit or abstract feeling or idea.

It is an educational beast, but one “known only through process and movement, never through dissection table analysis”.⁶ Which also describes—quite nicely I think—the processes of learning and discovery that occur within practice-led research. My observations have generally occurred in hindsight and peripherally. They have been imprecise realisations—shadows and ghosts—only ever seen out of the corner of my eye... the only evidence—blurry photographs and sweaty palms.

The monstrous turn

Initially I applied the dynamics of monstrosity seven to the design process with a sort of evangelical zeal—it’s alive! It’s alive! But eventually the predominantly formal nature of this investigation frustrated me. I had disturbed the aesthetics of my practice, and begun to deal with form in new and unfamiliar ways, but I could see where this was going, and I realised this was not really the kind of reinvention that I was after. If I learnt anything it was that I don’t really care about form for form’s sake.

Typically enough it was only later—in hindsight, and provoked by other people—that I was able to see that it was perhaps me who was the monster here. This tough realisation was an important turning point in the research as it represented my moving away from the purely formal investigations to an application of the monstrous within the broader concepts of research, practice, and domain.

Narcissism and autobiography

I want to suggest that practice-led research tends toward autobiography, but obviously this is a generalisation based on my own experience. My appearance in my work started early (the first Hot Rod Biology) and gained momentum gradually, until ultimately—most recently—I have ended up making self-portraits.

Initially I put images of myself in my work as something of a frustrated joke—a piss-take of the ‘Reflective Practitioner’⁸—but in doing so unexpectedly encountered some kind of resonance in reflection as a methodology. It felt horribly narcissistic and inappropriate (based on my existing assumptions...
about research9), but was, of course, highly provocative... scary, yet strangely engaging.

I have a tendency to focus on the flaws in things, and I think those of us who are not so narcissistic will inevitably feel a little monstrous when we’ve spent so much time in front of the mirror! The negotiation of ‘our’ reflection is inevitably difficult and painful...

Doubt
“You must be a duet in everything. For the individual, the single object, and the isolated is, you will admit, an absurdity. Why try and give yourself the impression of a consistent and indivisible personality?”10

The amplification (monstrous exaggeration) of my reflection produced an echo... two (or more?) of me — illustrating certain fractures, disruptions, and distractions within my practice—the disenchantment of my first chapter. Paranoia (conspiracy theories) and doubt (as to what I should really be doing) have plagued my research. But what appears — between the blood and guts, the false-starts and dead-ends, the images and the texts — is the transformation of doubt into provocation.

The real world
A few years ago now I went out with a really nice girl. She was attractive and had a great job. She was a professional musician, and sort of ‘famous’ in New Zealand. She treated me really well and was, for all intents and purposes, the ‘perfect’ girlfriend. Anyway I broke up with her because I got bored, but also because I’d started seeing Anna Dean11 — my current girlfriend. Anna is outrageous and untrustworthy. We’re often mean to each other and we fight all the time. In many ways we are a terrible couple, but it’s a love/hate relationship, and what I’m obviously alluding to here is some deeply ingrained desire for the provocative.

The paragraph above feels highly inappropriate here—overly personal and embarrassing!—but I’m leaving it in because it highlights how the auto-biographical tendencies of my research have opened me up to particular realisations about myself and, reciprocally, about my practice.

I need, like, a bit provocation in my life. And whereas initially I wanted to complain that ‘Graphic Design’ was not provocative enough to sustain my interest, looking at it now—from within the new perspective (or ‘frame’) generated by this research—I find it highly provocative.

The application of the monstrous to my ‘self’ has shed some light on my dislocation with an immediate community of practice. Through my exploration of the metaphor though, I have come to understand the value of peripheral participation—the marginal—in relation to imagination, innovation, and invention. So far from feeling disengaged and/or useless now, the attribution of monstrosity “to consequences of flouting divine proscription or of disturbing nature’s equilibrium”12 begins to describe my re-engagement with both my own practice and with the domain. And, in the end, I think I quite like feeling monstrous?

1. Slogan of the Situationist Internationale.

2. “In 1975 a teenager who would be called Johnny Rotten turned himself into a living poster and paraded down London’s King’s Road to World’s End—the end of the street—with ‘I HATE’ scrawled above the printed logo of a Pink Floyd t-shirt. He dyed what was left of his chopped-off hair green and made his way through the tourist crowds spitting at hippies, who tried to ignore him.” Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of The Twentieth Century. Harvard University Press, 1989. [27]

3. A as this research has developed, my understanding of ‘practice-led’ research has evolved, more or less, around this idea that the designer might apply their reflexive capabilities around form and content to the elements of the practice itself. This idea retroactively informed Daniel van der Velden’s article ‘Research and Destroy: Graphic Design as Investigation’ in Metropolis M, No.2. 2006.

4. From ‘Lazy Sunday Afterthoughts by The Experimental Jetset (in alphabetical order)’ in Dot Dot Dot #7.

5. Colin Nazhone Milburn, ‘Monsters in Eden: Darwin and Derrida’. MLN 118, John Hopkins University Press, 2003. [603–621] This text was hugely influential on my developing idea about how a practice might ‘evolve’. Milburn’s monstrous text—itself a writing together of the texts of Darwin and Derrida—discusses the importance (necessity) of monstrosity in evolutionary thought: “Together, Darwin and Derrida enact a critique of artificial constructions of nature that disrespects boundaries and emphasizes the deviations, the perversions, the mutations, and the monstrosities of the world.


7. Rather than articulate specific or particular dynamics I was interested in here I wanted to let the projects do the talking. And anyway I never really set out to explore any particular dynamic at any specific point in time. My relationship with the monster has been highly intuitive, and as elsewhere, has only been articulated in hindsight. However, see page 125 this chapter.


9. See introduction to chapter 1, Disenchantment. I would have previously referred to this kind of practice as ‘navel gazing’.


11. Anna appears my first Hot Rod Biology book wearing various bikinis and an Elvis mask (page 45). And again later in my research when I attempted to create a monstrous map of our relationship. See page 101.

Self-portrait as monster ("Designwolf"). Digital photograph, February 2006.
I've been trying to write something about the monstrousity of practice-based research. About how much I hate it, but that, in hindsight, it's obviously been rather fruitful for me. I want to say that practice-led research tends toward autobiography, and that its inevitable that we've all become quite monstrous here - too much time spent in front of the mirror (mine have been those warped and disorienting ones you can find at Coney Island). Followed by something witty - jocularly - about the horrific realisation that I had somehow become the object and subject of my own research. But then, of course, to articulate my point (all monsters have at least one sharp point) that only through this painful realisation - the creation of my own worst enemy, my own Mr Hyde, a self-motivated self-disruption bordering on masochistic nihilism - could I (we?) have made any progress. What kind of progress have I made? Like Victor Frankenstein's monster, mine has made me realise what's important, but unlike poor Victor and Dr Jekyll I hope I've been able to 'pull out' in time, for this is dangerous work. But sometimes things need to be destroyed to be rebuilt. And if I sound overly cynical or negative it's because I've found that the generally destructive dynamics of monstrousity - aberration, fear, illegitimacy, exaggeration, provocation, failure (you could go on but these are the ones I'm interested in) - might be rendered momentarily useful. Indeed, through the manifestation of my own cynicism - traversing my own discomfort and fear - I have, almost unconsciously, managed to re-engage with a practice/domain that I had previously all but given up on. I still think graphic design is a bit trite and banal, but that interests me now... deeply perhaps. And somehow that's all I really wanted anyway. To be more engaged by it.

I'm being brash and a little vague, so I guess I'll just propose monstrousity as a generative metaphor within practice-led learning - a strategy for extracting the implicit and the particular, and a methodology for articulating and/or negotiating the beast that will inevitably appear in explicit and abstract terms. How to write about yourself? How to negotiate the narcissism of it all? And to be honest, I want to see others suffer as I have done. If I don't I'll be skeptical about what they've gotten out of all this, that's all.

---

**PAIN & SUFFERING**

This abstract was written for part of a larger publication on practice-based research at RMIT. It describes this chapter fairly well in the sense that it's mostly - jocularly - about the pain and suffering of reflective practice. I still like the fact it points to my desire to see "others suffer as I have done". I'm sort of joking. But like any good joke it's funny because it's half true.
So here we are again! We’ve tried this a few times now... what is this our fourth attempt?

Yeah I know, and it’s funny because this was supposed to make it easier—talking to you, I mean. We thought it’d be a good idea—to provide a sort of ‘scaffold’ as Stuart would say, and to make it easier to talk about... well myself...

—which was the point originally?

Sure. But then, as usual, the idea seemed to gain all this extra significance... of course my tendency toward paranoia seems relevant within the schizophrenic nature of what we are trying to do here. [Laughs]

Well it does seem perfectly obvious—and not too much like a conspiracy theory—that your roughly considered fragmentation into multiple personalities might be directly related to the idea that you are uncomfortable talking about yourself?

Yeah... I think that’s probably got a lot to do with my initial ‘appearance’ in my work...

Early on when I was struggling to come up with a topic, I sort of put myself in there as a joke — partly taking the piss out of myself, but also, taking a cheap shot at the idea of ‘practice-based research’... at Schon’s ‘reflective practitioner’.

How do you mean?

That it was a response to what seemed to me to be a very narcissistic activity. That I didn’t believe in it... for quite a long time actually. In fact I’m still only really coming to terms with it now...

What, narcissism?

Um... more the idea that this was a viable ‘research’ methodology.

So your appearance in your research was initially a way for you to sort of humorously negotiate your scepticism of practice-based research?

Yeah for sure. Although it was never a very considered move at the time... more a throw-away gesture. Not something I thought would ever inform the topic.

But then, obviously it did...

Eventually... [pause]... a common sub-text to my research has been the desire to try and bring my practice as a musician and performer into my research around graphic design, and so initially my appearance—or performance—in my research was naively related to that.

I’d started to take on alter egos and pseudonyms—dressing up and acting the part—within the contexts of various bands I was playing in, and it was a schizophrenic version of one of these characters that appeared in the 20 minute DVD I made, ‘Inviting The Monster’. I made this for a seminar at which I was required to talk about my research, and instead of doing the 20 minute talk I was supposed to do, I got drunk, dressed up in/as my onstage persona ‘The Rev. Holden Gunn’, and ranted away at a cheap DVD camera inside an old shed out the back of our house in the middle of the night.

To be honest I was pretty focused on what I was saying—I was talking about monsters, fear, and failure at the time. And while I obviously thought about what I was doing in terms of the location and props, I hadn’t really thought much about the significance of actually putting ‘me’ in my work. Partly because I hadn’t even considered that this lo-fi 20 minute movie even was a ‘work’...
by which I mean I didn’t expect I’d ever look at it as a critical or informative project within the research. Like this interview it was really just supposed to be a way for me to deal with something that I didn’t really want to do… that scaffold again.

Right, so that brings me back to the idea that—talking to each other as we are—this was supposed to make things easier. When, in actual fact, it’s probably just made it very much harder!

Yes I know. It sort of defeats itself doesn’t it…

—you can’t fool yourself!

Yeah. I guess that’s the thing… a writer usually takes on a pseudonym to fool other people, Benjamin Franklin as ‘Mrs. Silence Dogood’ for example… to get something published or whatnot. Whatever it is that we’re doing here feels quite different… I guess the impossibility of fooling yourself seems quite relevant— the dubious nature of what we’re trying to do. I mean it’s quite provocative— talking to yourself. I have my doubts about it…
This is my alter ego, an onstage persona I call Holden Gunn. I should point out—it seems important—that he evolved from people constantly telling me that they felt like I became ‘somebody else’ on stage... a ‘monster’ even. I do believe in the value of the performance as much as the music. I've always been interested in that ability to lose yourself in the performance, and I must admit I've been quite inspired some of those TV evangelists. Sometimes I refer to this character as the Reverend Holden Gunn.
April 15, 2006

The Monstrosity of (Auto) Biography

That my research, and indeed that practiced research in general, tends toward autobiography. That Sluice Bailey’s text ‘On Biography’ in Di造成了 a space, ‘a gap between two poles’ from which the character materializes, ‘spectre-like’.

That this text of his relates back to something Robin Kinross wrote in the book ‘The Use of Failure’

That this makes me uncomfortable.

That it’s peculiar to seek out one’s own ghost.

That Dr. Jekyll’s quest for improvement through self-awareness went horribly wrong.

Posted by Luke Wood at 03:35 AM | Comments (0)

DOPPELGANGER

The movie stills on the pages that follow are taken from a movie I made to show instead of giving the 20 minute talk I was supposed to do at RMIT’s Graduate Research Conference in autumn 2005.

I wanted to include the band footage, and it had occurred to me that as I always wrote these talks first anyway that I could just film myself talking it and effectively get out of having to stand up and present in front of an audience. In hindsight it seems strange that I was nervous about presenting — talking — when I was happy to get up, play the guitar, and scream and yell into a microphone. Funnily enough it felt even stranger and more bizarre to be sitting in the audience watching? I thought a lot about the nature of the difference between my everyday-self and my more outrageous onstage persona… how to ‘invite’ him into my work as a designer, and how that might provoke me into practising differently somehow?"

The movie stills on the pages that follow are taken from a movie I made to show instead of giving the 20 minute talk I was supposed to do at RMIT’s Graduate Research Conference in autumn 2005. I wanted to include the band footage, and it had occurred to me that as I always wrote these talks first anyway that I could just film myself talking it and effectively get out of having to stand up and present in front of an audience. In hindsight it seems strange that I was nervous about presenting—talking—when I was happy to get up, play the guitar, and scream and yell into a microphone. Funnily enough it felt even stranger and more bizarre to be sitting in the audience watching? I thought a lot about the nature of the difference between my everyday-self and my more outrageous onstage persona... how to ‘invite’ him into my work as a designer, and how that might provoke me into practising differently somehow?

Doppelganger
January 29, 2006

Self aware and/or self obsessed

More than any other city I've spent time in, New York seems to be obsessed with itself. It often refers to itself through advertising billboards, radio stations, local news, etc as 'the greatest city in the world'. Of course there's something distinctly American about self obsession... but it's ultra palpable in New York... and I think it relates to my research.

The image at the top here is of a group of Manhattan's architects dressed as its iconic buildings & it's from the Rem Koolhaas book 'Delirious New York' which I got when I arrived here. Initially I'd heard about this book because he calls it a 'paradigm manifesto' and I was interested in that idea... my original manifestos were attempting to post nostalgia as having generative/productive possibilities. Then actually finding myself in NYC it seemed also the perfect intro to living here...

In tracing the lineage of the skyscraper, Koolhaas begins with the Lutine Observatory...
For the first time Manhattan's inhabitants can inspect their domain. To have a sense of the island as a whole is also to be aware of its limitations, the inviolability of its containment.

If this new consciousness limits the field of their ambition, it can only increase its intensity. Such inspections from above become a recumbent theme under Manhattanism, the geographical self-consciousness they generate is translated into spouts of collective energy, shared megalomaniac goals. [p. 25]

And then on Coney Island...

"Like the Venting Observatory, the Centennial Tower is an architectural device that provokes self-consciousness, offering that birds-eye inspection of a common domain that can trigger a sudden spurt of collective energy and ambition." [p. 23]

Of course in reading this I was thinking about the [image] I made where I had Ania photograph me from above (head) and below (feet), and my concern that my research was becoming narcissistic. I'm interested in this idea that in becoming self-aware you also inevitably become a little self-obsessed... and that somewhere within this self-obsession lies the dormant potential to become a monster... which is, after all, exactly what Manhattan is!

The picture above of the notice board I was originally looking at in relation to my search for people to play music with, but also linked nicely to something that Cameron brought up at my last seminar in October. I was attempting to negotiate the anxiety that all this self-reflexivity caused me in a more-or-less humorous [joc-ful] way, and Cameron mentioned Woody Allen. I've been planning to watch some Woody Allen films over since I got to NYC and haven't yet, but also I've been thinking about Seinfeld and Sex in the City... narratives set in NYC that revolve around smarlets who are funny primarily because of their nervousness, anxiety and self-obsession. Was psychoanalysis invented for NYC? Why is "I'm going to see my therapist" so unmistakably New York? Maybe it's because self-awareness is actually a very dangerous thing...

I think what I'm trying to get at here is something about a critique of practice-based research (Barton's 'reflective practitioners') in which the monstrous is a side effect? A problematic deviation, an abomination, but full of unexpected potential if you can find a strategy to cope with the beast? I like the idea that the original topic disappears as you ascend the observatory/tower... and you just end up seeing yourself. I like that this idea would be kind of disturbing and horrific to Design too.

Anyway, initially I just wanted to post this first image here of designers dressed as their work. I thought it related to my interests in performance and narrative, but also to the importance of approaching your work with a sense of humour. I like how these guys are attempting to engage more obviously (momentarily) with their practice. Also, and this is not a rhetorical question, am I right in thinking there's a lot of research done on how design engages audiences/users, but very little into how design engages designers?

Posted by Luke Wood at 04:17 AM | Comments (0)
You've mentioned that you “needed to be provoked”, and, often in the same breath, that “design needs to be provoked”. I sort of feel like I know what you mean, but I was wondering if by talking through it here we might articulate this idea a little more?

Uh huh... I've tended to work like that— I'll sort of start throwing a word around, trying it on for size, articulating what I mean by it 'as I go'... or in hindsight, when someone pulls me up on it. I like it actually. Working this way. A term appears in conversation, or in a text, that has a certain sort of resonance for me, and so I'll appropriate it, start using it... I often avoid going to the dictionary as long as I can because I enjoy trying to work out my own definition based on my own experiences.

Where do you want me to start?

I want to talk about your actual projects—the ‘designing’ that you did. You've said that provocation is a common thread that runs through the projects, but that it's changed or mutated as you've gone. Maybe we could think about it chronologically? You know, talk through the projects you did... start at the start?

[ Holding a green hard-cover book ] So this was the first project you did?

And it's interesting firstly because it was a 'set' project. By which I mean there was a brief — albeit a fairly open one— and a deadline. It was submitted as a requirement of the 'Research Methods' paper at RMIT. Anyway, it's occurred to me that there are sort of two kinds of provocation — of ʻproddingʼ— at work here... ummm...

You mean intended and unintended?

Yeah, sort of... I mean I was going to talk about how I was trying to provoke myself, or more precisely at this point, the way I designed things... but what comes to mind most vividly, looking back at this stuff, is how much I struggled to actually just get started.

Shit. [Pause]... I'm getting ahead of myself here...

—that's fine though. Perhaps they're related? Let's talk through that if you're thinking about it now, and come back to that other stuff? We can always edit this down later.

Ok, well... the fact I had to do it— that it had a deadline, and that it was more or less 'prompted' by my supervisor at the time asking us to collect and curate 100 images, was sort of something I could respond to. There was a certain amount of external motivation. Which, as a graphic designer for nearly ten years, I'd grown very used to. I struggled with the content a lot though... with developing that myself. Obviously I was used to being 'given' content— I'd never had to 'create' it.

So, that move from external to internal motivation...

—was very provocative.

[ Lays out images on floor. Images are of a young Elvis Presley within various combinations of letterforms. Some are black and white, some are in colour. ]

... the book was hard work, but at least it had an imposed timeframe and starting point. This project here— if you could call it that!... I had so much trouble getting started on something after the book. I actually got very scared, and I remember thinking I shouldn’t be doing this—the Masters I mean. I felt paralysed.
As I’ve already mentioned I struggled with the creation of content—mostly because I didn’t really have a topic ‘pinned-down’ at the time… it was so wide open [holds arms out wide]… you know. And what I was thinking about, in respect to both these projects, but mostly this second one, was how provocative I found it to have to come up with the content… to ‘invent’ the project.

So when you say you didn’t have a “topic pinned-down”, do you mean you didn’t really have any research questions to base these projects on or around? It seems to me that’s how this ‘project-based’ research thing usually works. Someone proposes a topic via fairly particular research questions and then sets about solving, or answering, these questions by the projects they set themselves?

Yeah that’s certainly what I’d expected I’d be doing… I wanted a problem to solve… and in hindsight, well…

—the problem was that there was no problem!? [Laughs]

Precisely. And of course, in hindsight, I feel quite happy about this stuff, unfinished as it is, because I can see that I was mapping out my interests, charting an area of research, and—most importantly—doing that ‘through’ the process of design.

We were going to talk today about how you’d been attempting to provoke yourself. Is this where that idea emerged? That you needed some sort of provocation to actually get started?

Again that’s something I’ve realised in hindsight. And you’re right… but that ‘self-provocation’, that’s what we were going to talk about—that’s what this chapter is supposed to be about. There’s something else though that I’m trying to get to here… and I’m not doing a very good job! I’ll try and say it plainly, to get to the point…

—sure thing. [Looks worried]

The point is to do with my being so stuck for so long. This stuff on the floor… all these potshots, false starts… I never finished it… I hardly finished any of the projects I started. The thing is this was all very provocative… and that’s where I want to start. To make that plain right now. Before I talk about the strategies I’ve attempted in order to provoke myself—to disrupt and upset myself — I want to acknowledge how disruptive and upsetting THIS was already!

What do you mean “THIS”?

The bloody Masters! Practice-based research… reflective practice… all that crap! I mean I’d been working in professional practice for a long time now. I thought I was a pretty good graphic designer… in fact I was bored with it all… but this transition into trying to make my own work—towards internal motivation, and the self-initiated project… it was really hard. And quite provocative… in, and of, itself.

Right I see what you mean, but I’m a little confused. You said you needed to be provoked. And you’re saying now that this process has been very provocative from the start. But we were going to talk about how, throughout your research, you’ve been actively trying to provoke yourself?

Can we take a break?
June 15, 2004

The Rockabilly Moment

Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Charlie Feathers, Greil Marcus, Tom Keifer... and doing stuff!

This song... and a bit of a rant be warn.

[Image: appropriated from Hatch Show Print: A Great American Poster Shop]

I had a great chat with Aaron Keiser the other day about my last visit to Nashville, my topic, and the fact I seem to be having trouble coming up with a project. We talked about Tom (Aaron's son) and about how he never got too caught up in theory. He just made rock and kind of the next thing through. Aaron says Tom never really read much about anything that directly related to his work but just read about whatever interested him, which eventually of course would end up coming out through the work.

During this conversation I asked him that last year (prior to beginning this research) I was extremely productive! I had two solo shows, started up three different bands, played live fairly regularly, and recorded an EP (not released yet thought). So what the hell's going on this year? It's funny how as an artist suddenly becomes so much harder to make work.

I had a conversation with a student of mine recently about how she "just needs to chill out, trust herself, and focus on making work that interests her." Ha ha! talk about practicing what you preach.

One of the things that came up from my seminar was that I should worry less about theory and focus on making some work. I related to that by saying that it found it hard to make work without having some kind of theory to base it on. But looking at last year I can see that's not true. I guess the difference is that there's supposed to be some kind of topic to my work besides this year and I'm always thinking about how best to do this...

Anyway, to cut a long story short I've decided to ditch (for now) the theory (Bakhtin, Jameson, etc.) and just immerse myself in stuff I enjoy and maybe use some of the material (content) for a potential project.

I'm borderline obsessed with 1950's youth culture at the moment. Why? (Don't ask questions that's not what you're doing right now let alone questioning everything can be very much like applying the handshake)

So, I've got the band back together, we've got a gig next Friday night, and I'm reading about Elvis and the rockabilly movement. There's obviously links to my topic here, but I'm trying to just read and enjoy rather than taking constant notes etc. (which I actually to be honest is pretty hard if I'm a Virgin!)... so,

Have come across Greil Marcus and his term the rockabilly moment. The link directly with what I was describing as the "hybrid moments" in my talk. Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Charlie Feathers... all were "Hybrid Practitioners"... all appropriated aspects from various sources to create a new music... all have been heavily appropriated since.

Actually that reminds me about what Cameron said about appropriation being the greatest form of flattery.

Elvis. Who has been appropriated more? What I find so bizarre about Elvis is how he's not really even a person anymore. I put up the Elvis mask I made new to an image of Jesus and it just sat there perfectly happy as though Jesus had just cut out a deal at Sun!

My appropriation of McGonnel only works if you know who he is, its communicative potential is limited by McGonnel's presence really only in the art culture if NZ fine art culture. Elvis is a whole other ball game! Elvis is Coca-Cola, MTV, the World Cup, fast food, marketing, sex, rock and roll... Elvis, the song and the image, wends its way into a extremely broad cultural memory. Perhaps that should be "multiple" cultural memories... "hybrid" cultural memory...

And there I go thinking about my bloody topic again. Maybe that's good? Maybe that means my topic pick for Luke the Researcher is as obvious something that's relatively passe and in what I do. I'm not saying (yet) but I'm getting to mention something, a word, here that I thought had long gone but that keeps cropping up... nostalgia. There it is! Like a big bloody ace, that won't quite last. I just am quite nostalgic. And I'm pretty sure its primary what drives a bit of my own appropriation. At the moment if I'm putting it down to the influence of my grandparents had on me. I'm not sure it needs to come back into the table as a statement if I guess I feel like its probably going to be there anyway... so maybe it should? Shit I don't know...

Right now I'm going to try and make something it might not be design as such. I've been asked by a magazine to make a cake for their first birthday party so that could be somewhere to start... Elvis loaf cake! Yes!

If you've read this far, please take the opportunity to tell me I'm not boring it.

I feel ok, fine in fact!

Posted by Luke Wood at June 15, 2004 10:06 AM
Elvis & Elliot Earls (top), & Art Chantry (below), trials for an illustrated alphabet, August 2004.
Elvis in Hans Holbien the Younger’s Dance of Death alphabet, trial for an illustrated alphabet, August 2004.

— Skeletons are good. Ref the metaphor “In the Closet.” Elvis’s twin brother?

— This scene could be Elvis signing the contract with the counsel, or for movies?
We should talk about monsters at some point.

Now's probably as good a time as any...

You don't mind jumping around between ideas?

No, it seems to make sense. It's how you've worked?

Yeah, I suppose...

Tell me about these ‘monsters’ then.

Well it's complicated... where to start?

I need to have a think about it.

---

[10 minutes later. Flicking through green hard-cover book. A bit frustrated]

Can you please just describe what you at least thought you were doing!? Like why the hell is your girlfriend wearing an Elvis mask? Start with Elvis... you've used his image a lot. Why?

Hmmm... yeah Elvis is the connection between those first two projects I guess. Maybe if I just describe what I was up to...

— that'd be start!

Well... the first project, the book 'Hot Rod Biology', was supposed to be an attempt at hybridising the formats—the conventions—of a biology textbook and a hot rod magazine. The idea to approach it like this came from the 100 images I'd been asked to collect... mine were all over the place conceptually; photos of my family, covers of books I'd read, images of graphic design I liked, record covers of course. They were disparate things, only really connected through me, and in looking at them I sort of perceived a sense of dislocation... a feeling that I wasn't very consistent in what I liked. Eclectic perhaps.

Over the previous couple of years I'd developed a tendency to appropriate the aesthetics of various visual languages... from Swiss Modernism, Josef Muller-Brockmann et al, kitsch 1950s type stuff, to heavy metal record covers. It's common for graphic designers to do this—it's sort of fun. But I wasn't happy... I think I was searching... for a new 'bag of tricks', a new visual language.

Partly due to my grandfather's passing away, and the nostalgia that sort of thing generates, I'd started listening to Elvis a lot. The young Elvis I mean... his early stuff, mostly the Sun recordings. I was fascinated by them... the raw energy in the sound... the grain of his voice, the echo and all that. But I was equally fascinated by the idea that this was a hybrid 'bastard' music.

He stole that from black Blues and R&B performers...

Absolutely! Parts of it. And that's my point—'parts'. Cause he also "stole"—if you want to use that word—from Country & Western, Bluegrass, and travelling evangelists. And that's what, at that point in time, I was affected by—the idea that you can take all these disparate parts and combine them together to make something new. That excited me. I desired newness... I'm being very honest here now that you've got me started!

Keep going then.

I was much more interested in music then—when I started this. Testament to the fact that graphic
design really didn’t interest me very much anymore. So anyway I liked the idea that I could sort of use Elvis as my ‘model’, and that rather than look to design for inspiration, it could come from my interests in music and feed back into my work in design.

Elvis’ first record is really interesting... have you seen it? Or heard the tracks... [Gets up]

I think you’ve played it to me before?

[Begins to search through a small pile of 45’s lying next to the stereo] I mean Elvis is the face and voice, but there were obviously others involved... we should come back to that. That’s important now I think about it—other people... Anyway I just wanted to mention that this was a group effort, I won’t bother naming everyone but Elvis’ band were very good and the recording and production are very important here too.

[Puts one of the records on the turntable and lowers the needle] So this is the first Elvis Presley single—‘That’s All Right Mama’. It was originally written and performed by a Black artist, Arthur ‘Big Boy’ Crudup. The B-side to the disc is a version of Bill Monroe’s ‘Blue moon of Kentucky’. Neither song was originally written or performed by Presley, but both were somehow transformed—rendered new. So much so, that the single was an overnight success, and the rest is history.

But what I really like about this seven inch piece of plastic is that it reveals—both literally and poetically—the strategy for it’s own transformation. One side taken from a formulaic blues structure, and the other from an equally predictable country tune... within this artefact though, each previously distinct genre has become fused into the other—as if the vinyl pressing went haywire and spat out some kind of hybrid monster.
"THE KING IS GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN/ IS THIS THE STORY OF JOHNNY ROTTEN"

NEIL YOUNG: HEY HEY MY MY

TOURD THE STATES IN EARLY '78...

JOHNNY ENDS THE SHOW WITH HIS NOW FAMOUS
"EVERY TIME THE FEELING YOU'VE BEEN CHEATED"

A 'VISITATION' - "ELVIS' LAST VISITS - JOHNNY ROTTEN" AND ASKS THE LADS "EVER GET THE FEELING YOU'VE BEEN CHEATED?"

ELVIS DIED ON 16TH OF AUGUST 1977
Elvis is so rich and full of potential, but I struggled figuring out what to do with him. In hindsight I can see that the struggle really was with the creation of my own content... anyway, eventually I began to come up with conspiracy theories... the ability of the paranoid mind to invent connections that aren’t really there! I was reading two Greil Marcus books at the time *Dead Elvis* and *Lipstick Traces*, and this image is a direct result of that... I was interested in the monstrous rewriting of history, fantasy and dreams... that the implausible situation might provoke some new understanding.
This image obviously relates pretty directly to that idea about exploring the ‘rupture’ in my practice... to create a sort of Bastard Modernism. I liked the idea I could mangle the corpses of dead styles together—with our reverb we will raise the dead! I was interested in the ‘crash’... clashing consequence, non-sequitur. Images of crashed cars became a common in my work... partly because my girlfriend was involved in a car crash around this time and I was quite fascinated by the wreck... that it had a kind of tragic beauty about it, but also that idea that the accident is a very generative moment—Virilio’s ‘Museum of Accidents’ for example. That’s my girlfriend’s body with Elvis’ head grafted onto it.

With our reverb, we will raise the dead.
April 04, 2006

**Armand Leroi on Mutants (and Oprah's freak show)...**

As an occasional cure for home sickness I log onto National Radio. Recently I heard an interview with Armand Leroi talking about his latest book *Mutants.* Armand is an evolutionary biologist with a specific interest in genetic deviation. What was most interesting to me was how what he talked about was more broadly applicable to culture attitudes about deformity and perfection. Armand talked about how important mutations are right now in terms of pointing us to what specific genes are actually supposed to do. He spoke about how we're currently in a period of renewed interest in mutation and abnormality, but how that interest was one based on the correction, or normalisation, of such 'facts'.

Of course he talked about the history of mutation, how early on misshapen babies were assumed to be monsters or demons, and then later the freak shows of the Victorian era (The Elephant Man in particular), which were eventually, for obvious moral reasons, what drove general interest in mutation underground.

In my thesis I want to try and negotiate/articulate my disengagement with the fundamental description of design as 'improvement'. To develop a critique of the 'cult of purity' that is pervasive in the discipline, and to justify or locate a position other to that. More than any other creative practice, I think, design (broadly) tries to base itself on what it thinks society wants/needs. It is therefore more highly susceptible to the general perceptions of the culture it plays for.

I've been watching the TV series *Carnivale,* which follows a travelling circus around the southwest United States during the Great Depression. Of course they have a 'Freak Show,' and in one episode 'Ben' is sent out to locate 'The Lobster Boy.' Last year I watched *Tod Browning's Freaks,* and I have to admit that, like Diane Arbus, I've become mildly fascinated by the alterations that an error in gene reproduction can cause on a human body. Following the Diane Arbus lead I've heard stories of illegal 'underground' freakshows existing in New York City well into the 1960s... but I haven't been able to find any here now. Where did they go? Is it just unethical, or don't we have mutants anymore? Are we that infected by the desire for normality that we've done away with such abnormality through science and medical technology? Yeah, kind of... Armand explains.

And then this! *The Mermaid Girl on Oprah Winfrey.* Is Oprah wanting to get the 'ol freak show started again? Naming the unfortunate child 'The Mermaid Girl' (a la 'The Lobster Boy' and 'The Elephant Man') would certainly suggest so, although in true Oprah fashion the child is referred to as a 'miracle'. I went to Oprah's site because I was interested in the aesthetics of 'self-help'... to find this there certainly makes me think 'I'm onto something...'

although when I told Anna I'd been listening to the interview with Armand Leroi, she said she'd just been having a chat with him in Wellington! Spooky serendipity... or a sign?

 Posted by Luke Wood at 04:34 AM | Comments (1)
I don’t know maybe it’s just me? Something I’ve learnt about myself through all this—that I need a bit of provocation in my life... to get into things, to stay interested.

Don’t you think that’s a sort of truism for creative practices in general though?

Yeah well, you’d think so. [Pause]

Actually your question makes me think about my disenchantment with graphic design. You said “creative practices”, but obviously we’re talking about ‘design’, and more specifically ‘graphic design’... and you’ve got me thinking about communities of practice. The fact that—when I started this— I didn’t really have one! And that one of the most important things I’ve gotten— almost accidentally— out of this research has been an emerging sense of a like-minded community...

—a more provocative one?

Exactly. That’s sort of what I was talking about earlier... ‘safety’... that Design is so caught up in, and bound to safety. Design is almost always described or defined based around ideas about improvement, and so there’s very little room for doubt or danger... for the provocative... why I’m sceptical of the term ‘Communication Design’. It just reeks of safety!

So you mean to say that you were unable to engage with a community of practice because it was too safe?

Well... more that it wasn’t provocative.

I’ve told you that I tended to hang out with artists rather than designers? All my friends had been artists. I lived with them, and have been involved with art galleries throughout my career as a graphic designer. I’m generalising here of course, but I want to point out that I’ve found that community far more stimulating than any I’ve encountered in my professional practice as a graphic designer. Having thought about this a lot in the last year or so, I realise that this ‘stimulation’ had something to do with the provocative nature of the conversations I’d encounter within the domain of ‘Art’... and then obviously that I wasn’t encountering this sort of conversation in Design.

Was it just a sort of criticality that was missing?

Ahhh... yeah sort of. More a sense of ‘cynicism’ though... I enjoyed the cynicism, or should I say ‘doubt’, that my artist friends would happily display... and occasionally attempt to articulate.

I should point out too, that my practice had been very geographically isolated up until I undertook this Masters. And so the design community I’m bitching about here is specific to New Zealand. It’s not like I hadn’t tried either... I’d taken part in a lot of industry related hoo-ha... I’d even been a judge at New Zealand’s biggest design award. Actually that experience seems particularly relevant here.

In relation to the lack of provocation?

In relation to the conversations... the community... and I guess ironically you could say I now find the lack of provocation quite provocative!? [laughs]

Can you explain that?

Well the whole thing was ridiculous. It was a farce actually! The situation was that there was me and five other judges who all had to go around the work together. The other judges were all people who ran their own “very successful” studios... but they were business people. By which I mean they were more interested in the business side of running a studio than they were in the process of designing or the artefacts of graphic design. So right from the start we weren’t even talking about
the same things! They’d be earnestly reading the briefs— that had to accompany each entry, but which was obviously written in hindsight by the studio to ‘fit’ the work— and arguing about which jobs had best answered the brief, and which jobs had done the best for the clients… economically… market-wise, you know.

Anyway I didn’t want to read the briefs. I thought they were all phoney anyway. I was looking for work that engaged me—as a designer… work that I thought was provocative. I wanted to be surprised… teased and delighted. I was quite happy to be shamelessly subjective in my judgements as I thought, “well that’s why they asked me to be here surely!”

But of course all the work I liked was considered “risky”… that’s what the other judges said. I think they meant it was risky in the sense it might not ‘move the product’ or something like that? And there were more of them than me, so when it came down to a vote they’d always win… and the awards were full of junkmail!

Based on that experience I began to generalise about graphic design being a discipline that fundamentally could not sustain provocative or doubtful work. I was quite depressed…

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I wanted to do something quite ridiculous. I was thinking about the ‘mad scientist’… the maker of the monster. I wanted to escape the safety and conservatism of graphic design… so I went to town one night—midnight precisely—and ‘dug up’ one of my posters that had been covered over. I had my friend video it—a performance I guess you could call it—and then I edited it together with a song by The Frantics called ‘Werewolf’. I didn’t think about any of it too much before I did it. I wanted it to be a little crazy and off-the-cuff. I wanted try to push and test my idea about what graphic designers do, how they behave, that sort of thing…

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**INSANITY**

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Elvis consuming his influences, trial for an illustrated alphabet, September 2004.
When I’d studied design as an undergraduate student in the early 90s computers were still relatively new to the game. We were taught—sceptically—that they were ‘only a tool’. Photoshop’s plethora of filters and effects were evil and tacky, and—like decoration in general—were considered off-limits. So of course part of my attempt to disrupt my previous (brainwashed?) frame of reference has been to try and make ugly work. The best way I could think of to do this was to ‘go to town’ with Photoshop. This was harder than it sounds, and you need to bear in mind my Modernist upbringing—Swiss International style predominantly—when you consider this image. For the record I want to be clear that I still find this ugly.
So getting back to Elvis and this idea about creating something new out of old, or conventional, parts?

Yeah, and so I started to think about hybridity in that respect. And boundaries... or ‘borders’. Early on I was quite interested how languages sort of bleed into one-another at the borders of various countries, and you get new hybrid languages appearing—‘Spanglish’ for example. I think I thought that if I could develop myself a new visual language I could be happy to be a graphic designer again. Of course my disenchantment was more complicated than that, but this is what I was trying to do for quite a while...

This is where the monsters came from?

Well yes, but slowly! I didn’t think about monsters for a while to begin with, but then when the monstrous occurred it made complete sense... like the ground-work was already there.

In thinking about the nature of hybridity I’d been looking to biological references. My father was a biologist and some of this came from him. Of course I started to think about taxonomy... the triggers from my research early on were Appropriation / Hybridity / Taxonomy... how didn’t I see the monstrous in that! [Laughs]

So ‘Frankenstein’ was the obvious reference point for you... the appropriation of previously unrelated parts, pieced together to create something new... something “alive”!

Yeah. And so immediately Elvis turned into a monster in my work. I dug up references, things people had said, that made him out to be quite monstrous. I liked the idea that what seemed so sweet and inoffensive now had once scared a lot of people. I mean it’s a bit basic, but I still like that idea...

—to scare people?

And to scare yourself...

That confused me for a long time actually. Obviously I’d begun to think about fear to a certain extent, once the monstrous came on stage, but it took me a while to recognise that I could just deal with my own fear and anxiety in the work I made.

And not worry about scaring other people?

I guess I began to see here that the research could be—perhaps should be—about ‘me’, or my practice.

I mean, in relation to those three triggers I mentioned, and then via this developing idea about ‘monstrosity’, I was trying my best to make ‘ugly’ work. I used the word ‘grotesque’ more though I think? Anyway, course, making ugly work helped me kind of locate the aesthetic boundaries or borders of my existing practice... and as a testament to that I can still say I really hate a lot of that work that I made then.

You “hate” everything you do!

Well that’s kind of true, but not completely. Often I can like things in hindsight. But this stuff... the Elvis Presley project, the cushions... where that ended up—I find it quite embarrassing. Still!

So is that a ‘good’ thing?

I think so. I mean I didn’t get a great piece of work out of it, but it was very useful in the sense that
I learnt a lot from it.

**What did you learn exactly?**

Well initially that ugliness—or the grotesque—was not what I was after, but also—and most importantly—that I could see how a topic could develop through making work. I sort of understood, for the first time, that my research could be 'led' by my practice... by 'making', as opposed to sitting down and trying to write up some pseudo-scientific hypothesis with some vaguely predetermined outcome!

I'd begun to see a certain sort of potential in provoking myself by trying to make ugly work. I couldn't articulate this at the time, but I later realised that it had helped me begin to create a map, or chart, of my practice. It helped locate some edges... those borderlands where I'd hoped a new language might evolve.

**Can we jump back slightly? You mentioned provoking yourself—scaring yourself. And I remember when this came up in one of the seminars you gave—the one where you presented The Elvis Presley Project actually—Cameron made a point of that fact that it was almost impossible to scare, or surprise yourself.**

Yeah I remember. Of course I could see his point, but I sort of didn't entirely agree. I mean I'd scared myself before. My initial reference for that was driving too fast... something I used to do all the time. I spent a lot of time thinking about this following that particular seminar... I decided it wasn't the 'fright' so much that I was after, but rather an underlying sense of unease. I really started to think about monstrosity in more complex terms than just aesthetic or formal qualities... I started to think about fear and anxiety as an everyday thing. The unknown, or the unseen...

The idea that a monster you don't see is infinitely scarier than the one that you do see.

[Shaking head] That the actual monster— the thing— is a manifestation of some intangible fear.

A metaphor.

A ‘generative’ metaphor... in the sense that we can learn something about the abstract thing it represents.

**Abstract thing... a practice?**

But I still wasn't ready to point the research directly at my practice yet. In fact during this period we're discussing now... after that seminar— I think it was my second one— I was kind of stuck again. I didn't want to carry on with the Elvis images, and while I was thinking a lot about fear and anxiety, and the everyday, I had real trouble figuring out what to do.

Which is largely what led to my making the DVD for my next seminar, the third one.

**That you hadn't done anything?**

Yeah.

I sort of knew I had a lot to talk about though... I'd been reading a lot about monstrosity in film and in cultural theory. And, of course, I'd been watching a lot of horrors.
I felt that graphic design and monsters shared a common goal—to disrupt or disturb our everyday experience. My attempts at ugliness and my growing appreciation for the ephemeral nature of graphic design led me, one day, to kitsch. By the time I’d made these cushions I actually sort of liked them... they were supposed to be ugly and offensive, but by this stage I’d disrupted my frame of reference enough that I felt too comfortable about these. Obviously they were literally ‘comfortable’, and I probably should have filled them with concrete or something.
I realised I’d need to sort of stake a claim—draw a line in the sand—to test, or even locate, any personal boundaries...

—the Manifestos?

And the maps.

I mean they worked in the same way...

How do you mean?

Maybe not the same way exactly... but in complimentary ways...

One is ‘pre’-scriptive and the other is ‘de’-scriptive. A map generally describes something—an area or domain or something—whereas a manifesto is more future oriented... it prescribes action of some sort. So I guess I liked the idea that the two would work hand-in-hand. Visualising where I’d been, where I’d come from, and speculating about new possible paths or trajectories for myself.

Couldn’t the maps actually be manifestos, and vice versa?

Sure. And that sort of happened... I certainly noticed that.

The idea to make maps originally came from my thinking about monsters. This French art historian I know had sent me all these old maps with sea monsters on them. They were beautiful pieces, very old, with some very elegant looking monsters—French ones I guess? Anyway obviously these particular monsters tended to represent uncharted waters... a fear of the unknown. Of course this fitted nicely with what I’d been talking about in regard to locating the boundaries or borders of my own practice... the idea that that’s where I would find my monsters, you know.

So the maps, as well as describing what is known, also sort of promote further travel... into the unknown?

Yeah, that’s what I was hoping for. The problem is that it sounds very easy, and it’s been very much more complicated than that. It’s like how you can only ever describe the horizon from where you are. You can’t get to it... if you move, it moves. Which is, perhaps, why hindsight has been so important for me?

That idea of a horizon, is sort of like what you were saying about drawing a line in the sand. Standing in one spot, pointing a stick into the sand, and turning around... you can only reach so far, and you can only see so far.

[Looks confused] I’m not sure what you’re getting at?

A way to locate yourself.

Uh huh...

—well that’s what you were trying to do. No?

Ummm... well. You’re right.

But provoke myself as well.
HOT ROD BIOLOGY

MANIFESTOES FOR MONSTROSITY

The Monster is an interruption, a catalyst for a mutation in pattern—a hybrid moment, a random interjection, a flaw, a fright. Our meeting with the Monster should leave us changed—our habits and our expectations dislocated and torn. In creating a Monster we seek the excitement, risk and fear of the unknown!

For the nostalgic practitioner, suffering from a potentially fatal disease, venturing into the unknown will inevitably mean some discomfort and fear. The maker of monsters will push their notion of themselves, dislocate their own ego, and ask “what if”...

Through the application of the following manifestoes the practitioner undertakes to seek their own genetic deviation—the past bred with the present, the abnormal birth, the interrupted future. In reanimating these wretched shapes and forms from our collective but forgotten pasts, we seek new points of departure, new trajectories from the past!

Loose-ends, bad connections, the non-sequitur; the everyday transformed, the vernacular garbled, the familiar unfamiliar, an irreverent mediocrity!

Zombie Manifesto

Part 1 [ARTEFACT] ................................................. [THE MONSTER ENGAGES THE AUDIENCE]

1. The Zombie is an animated corpse, brain-dead, apathetic and mindless
2. The Zombie craves and feeds on human brains (memories)
3. However, the Zombie has little or no awareness of it’s surroundings; it has no subjective experience
4. The Zombie is in-between dead and alive ... in a state of suspended animation (finished/unfinished)
5. The Zombie moves slowly, and is only effective in numbers
6. The Zombie is nostalgic (the mall)

Part 2 [PROCESS] ................................................. [THE MONSTER ENGAGES THE PRACTITIONER]

1. In creating the Zombie we dig up the past—like grave-robbers, we seek out that which has been forgotten, buried, or put aside
2. Through the Zombie we explore rot and decay—we will be working backwards
3. We devolve the artefact in an attempt explore the unfinished (the undead)
4. The Zombie is entirely formal, in it’s making we care not for meaning, content, or context
5. Create as many Zombies as you can, work on more than one at a time
6. In reanimating these mindless shapes and forms from our collective but forgotten pasts—in devolving the corpse—we seek (re)generative methodologies; new and unexpected formal turns for the present
Frankenstein Manifesto

Part 1 [ARTEFACT] .................................................. [THE MONSTER ENGAGES THE AUDIENCE]
1. The Monster is manufactured from stolen parts
2. Any relationship between the parts will be largely accidental
3. The monster is a hybrid being, confused and ugly
4. The Monster is a non-sequitur
5. The Monster is misunderstood
6. At once strange and familiar, the Monster will offend our taxonomic urge
7. The Monster is nostalgic

Part 2 [PROCESS] .................................................. [THE MONSTER ENGAGES THE PRACTITIONER]
1. In making the Monster we seek new wholes from unrelated parts
2. The parts, forgotten or discarded pieces, will come from disparate backgrounds
3. The parts are familiar, the whole unfamiliar
4. In making the Monster we seek to clash consequence
5. We delight in making unexpected connections
6. The Monster is assembled at speed, the connections and loose-ends left visible.
7. In making the Monster we explore difference and prohibition
8. In it’s becoming the Monster will question its maker’s own habits and beliefs
9. In making the Monster we seek an evolutionary mutation in our practice through a process of hybridisation

Werewolf Manifesto

Part 1 [ARTEFACT] .................................................. [THE MONSTER ENGAGES THE AUDIENCE]
1. The Werewolf is a hybrid artefact that contains two distinct modes of being; one benign, the other threatening
2. However, it must at all times be one or the other, never both at once (although one always resides in the other)
3. The Werewolf changes systematically, being set off by certain specific triggers
4. The Werewolf is torn between logic and instinct
5. The Werewolf is nostalgic (primal instinct)
Part 2 [PROCESS] ........................................... [THE MONSTER ENGAGES THE PRACTITIONER]

1. Through the Werewolf we switch systematically between being in and out of control
2. We play with triggers for the switch/change, the full moon for example
3. In creating the Werewolf we seek moments of incompatibility between the logical and the instinctual
4. To explore paradox and duality
5. Through the Werewolf we explore the potential of chance, mistake, failure and deviation
6. We seek the horror and excitement of being momentarily out of control

Vampire Manifesto

Part 1 [ARTEFACT] ........................................... [THE MONSTER ENGAGES THE AUDIENCE]

1. The Vampire is a parasite, it feeds on the blood of others
2. The Vampire is beautiful, slick, compelling and seductive.
3. The Vampire only comes out at night
4. The Vampire is manipulative
5. The Vampire is never satisfied
6. The Vampire casts no shadow and has no reflection (No past, no future... nothing behind, nothing beyond)
7. The Vampire is nostalgic

Part 2 [PROCESS] ........................................... [THE MONSTER ENGAGES THE PRACTITIONER]

1. To create a Vampire is to appropriate not the physical parts, or the body, but the essence
2. In creating the Vampire we seek to revive the dead (the past) by inviting them feed on the blood of the living (the present)—it is a parasitic process
3. The Vampire is a predominantly conceptual, as opposed to formal, monster
4. The Vampire must however be beautifully crafted if it is to seduce and deceive
5. To deceive ourselves
6. Through the creation of Vampires we seek to contaminate the purity of our own practice
Alien Manifesto


1. The Alien is in the wrong place at the wrong time
2. The Alien simultaneously makes-visible and erases boundaries
3. The Alien speaks another language
4. The Alien is both strange and familiar to us
5. The Alien is trans-
6. The Alien is nostalgic (for it's correct place and time, ET for example)

Part 2 [PROCESS] ............................................. [THE MONSTER ENGAGES THE PRACTITIONER]

1. In creating the Alien we explore familiar contexts with inappropriate forms
2. Through the exploration of the inappropriate we aim to notice the shape and location of boundaries that define our practice
3. With the Alien we seek to cross the border—to travel—and speculatively explore an unknown territory
4. In the production of the Alien we seek to transform our practice by erasing ideological borders, and colonising foreign methodologies

We, the undersigned, hereby commit to make monstrosities. We undertake to generate mutations in our practice, while attempting to disrupt the expectations of any audience to our work.

Name: ___________________ Signature: ___________________ Date: __/__/____

Name: ___________________ Signature: ___________________ Date: __/__/____

Name: ___________________ Signature: ___________________ Date: __/__/____

Name: ___________________ Signature: ___________________ Date: __/__/____

Watch out! COMING SOON .......... THE FIRST HOT ROD BIOLOGY Ghost Manifesto!
September 14, 2005

Fuck the map [crisis continued]

This is what I've been working on in response to the "Frankenstein Manifesto". I thought I'd start with that one cause I had it the most "faded" in my head. I enjoyed the process of making this in the beginning (last week), but by today I'm feeling totally fucking lost and am wondering what the fuck I'm doing? I'm becoming increasingly frustrated by the fact that I have absolutely nobody here to talk to about my research. All these ideas just bounce around in my head, and occasionally gets regurgitated onto this blog... I'm pissed off, and I can't seem to get the fuck out of Christchurch.

In no particular order...

1. One good thing that happened was that I modified the poster and I guess they could focus on that... the 'book' exist as is MADE to push the manifest, and perhaps the outcome of the artefact, just doesn't matter that much?

2. Another thing I like about this is the model aspect, that it exists in space (why it doesn't photograph). It was making it do begin with. I have the tape and the shadows... the core ends and connections I was looking for?

2. I think maybe the thing I'm struggling with the most is the generation of content... and it's all getting very confusing. What IS this a map of?

2.2.1 Going with the manifest I seem to always choose parts more or less randomly. I wasn't worrying much about the content in the beginning, and very quickly the map had very little to do with my relationship with Anna. I decided this didn't matter. Fuck the content the Monster is about form. Searching for a new style. The Monster is about delivery.

2.2.2 I can't just stick what's randomly though! I think I mean between it being a 'Picture' or an actual 'Diagram', if you know what I mean.

2.3 I finally wanted the content to be completely separate to the research topic as though it was just a design job someone else had given me. I'm having trouble avoiding the two.

2.4 I want this to be a Design research project not an Art one.

3. I'm still doubting the value of this whole fucking topic. I don't whether I should just try and work through it? Or shift my focus? It doesn't FEEL RIGHT. I know that sounds chicken, but hopefully someone gets what I mean? I feel like I'm flogging a dead horse... this all feels very similar to what I was doing at this time last year with the Elva cushions. A year down the track and no progress? Fuck.

3.1 I think what feels most wrong about this is that it is so formal. I mean in the sense that it is mostly stylistic you could say Process I guess, but forward formal outcomes... delivery. It's not to say that form doesn't interest me, it does. I just feel like there needs to be "more"...? (Could this be where the manifest comes in? What is my  Object? What is my Subject?

4. I would really like to make my work on The National Grid my research. It doesn't have to all do with the "Metastasis/Manifesto/Manifesta" topic though.

Posted by Luke Wood at 08:11 PM | Permalink | Email Post
The idea to turn the maps onto my practice came surprisingly late. Maybe because it was so obvious. Anyway these maps you see here are very important, they represent my initial escape from the idea that I had to make mostly formal/aesthetic monstrosities, and a move into a more epistemological—perhaps ‘holistic’?—inquiry about practice. Rather than be provocative as such, I intended these to help me locate monsters and venture more deeply into ‘the unknown’. Not surprisingly perhaps, just doing these was extremely difficult... I wanted to be precise—in my placement of the words—I wasn’t trying to be poetic... and so it was, in the end, quite a provocative exercise. This island is the shape of my head and shoulders, photographed from above.
The idea to turn the maps onto my practice came surprisingly late. Maybe because it was so obvious. Anyway these maps you see here are very important, they represent my initial escape from the idea that I had to make mostly formal/aesthetic monstrosities, and a move into a more epistemological—perhaps 'holistic'?—inquiry about practice. Rather than be provocative as such, I intended these to help me locate monsters and venture more deeply into 'the unknown'. Not surprisingly perhaps, just doing these was extremely difficult... I wanted to be precise—in my placement of the words—I wasn't trying to be poetic... and so it was, in the end, quite a provocative exercise. This island is the shape of my head and shoulders, photographed from above.

The Unknown

This island is obviously my feet—photographed from below this time. The idea with this map was to chart my influences in relation to graphic design. Interestingly most of the people here are not people I know, or have ever met, and so looking at it now it provides an illuminating picture of my disenchantment about my immediate community of practice. Also interesting, looking backwards through time at this picture, is Stuart Bailey's appearance on the horizon. I've since met, and sort of gotten to know, Stuart. His work's been very influential for me.
I’m not quite sure how to put this, but it’s something about the maps not being very aggressive. Ummm... so what I mean is that there’s a call to arms sort of built into the very idea of the manifesto—as a convention it more or less requires it... a demand for blood . Whereas the poetics of the map are much more... shit I want to say feminine, but what I mean is... [Pause]

Well, you know, I sort of left the maps behind eventually. I had begun to realise I was very interested in writing... I was finding it very difficult—writing—but I ‘liked’ it.

More than designing?

Maybe that’s it? I just found the manifestos more provocative because I struggled to write them... I found the maps a bit easier.

Because they were ‘designed’?

Yeah I think so. I mean I struggled with the content still— the ideas they contained. But the process— visualising— I was more comfortable with... more used to.

Aren't your manifestos in some sense ‘designed’?

Of course. In the end, as a designer everything you do is designed. It’s impossible to not design things anymore.

So the design of the manifestos then?

Right... I see what you’re getting at.

Well I was thinking about Wyndham Lewis, you know. ‘Blast’... the design of it. That the way it looked was as important as what it said.

Yeah sure, and like I said I can’t not consider the way something looks... it’s fundamentally impossible—and that bugs me.

But you’ve reminded me about my inclusion of the first ‘Manifestos for Monstrosity’ in The National Grid. I’d begun to think about including them in it, but I’d written them a good six months earlier... and I’d moved on. I think Lisa suggested I consider them—but I think she might have meant to consider ‘returning’ to them? In other words, to rework them. Which I thought about... but I found it really hard to go back to that point. I decided that they should stand as they were... an honest reflection of what I was thinking at the time.

[Hands over an A4 document] Of course I’d just written them in Word— I hadn’t thought at all about the way they looked while I was writing them. I mean they were specifically about form and aesthetics, but when I wrote the texts I remember just trying to be as concise and clear as possible... to try and articulate the monster metaphor precisely as I saw it at that point in time — planning to apply the instructions, or prescriptions, later. And I’d already done that months ago... in fact, that’s where the first maps came from, the ones of me and Anna. [Points to roughly assembled map image on wall]

Oh?

Yeah sorry, I was wrong before. I remember now... Emily was giving me images of old maps because I’d already started on these ones. In fact, she was probably drawing my attention to the link between monsters and maps!? So, initially, I just needed some ‘material’— content— to test out my manifestos on, and at the time Anna and I were going through a bit of a rough patch—she was leaving town... [Pause]
I remember thinking I could take the piss out of Lisa’s thinly veiled suggestion that you could solve anything with a good diagram!

So you mapped your relationship?

Well, started to... plenty of monsters to tackle there! But it didn’t really work out. I was going to make five different maps all using the same basic material—content—but each applying a different manifesto... the zombie, the vampire, etc. But it was in doing this that I realised that perhaps I wasn’t so interested in a purely formal regeneration after all?

I mean, I was, of course... but more that I didn’t want my research to end there. I could already see how it would work out... and I wasn’t ‘happy’, you know what I mean?

Yeah sure, I guess. You’ve often used the term ‘generative’, and you applied that to formal outcomes for a long time. But to tell you the truth I always sort of knew that that wasn’t very ‘you’... you’ve always been more interested in conceptual practices than more purely formalist ones.

[Waving A4 document about] Which brings me back to this thing in a way?

You used to be quite a fan of Lawrence Weiner in that time immediately after you left art school, and so of course I’m thinking about his idea—a strategy of conceptual art—that “the work need not be built”?

Yeah right. I hadn’t thought about that, but perhaps it was lurking in the back of my mind somewhere? I certainly have come to like the aesthetics of word processing software. In fact I’d tried to talk Jonty, my co-editor, into doing the entire first issue of The National Grid in Microsoft Word! [Laughs]

... so what I was getting to was my decision to leave them—to publish them in The National Grid—just as I’d done them initially... in Word, in Times New Roman. I got to thinking there was something very much more monstrous about that... to not design them. To not give them any skin! Of course it’s conceited... but airily appropriate perhaps?

Form follows content?

Not at all! Form follows elliptical apparition! [Laughs]

The first manifesto you did though... the one in the book you made—Hot Rod Biology...

— oh, ‘The Hybrid Practitioner’? [Searches through a pile of A4 documents]

Right. You designed that? I remember it looked very much like what it talked about.

[Hands over another A4 document. This one is rough, photocopied, and has sections of pink highlighter over it] Definitely. It’s still my favourite. I mean what I like about it is that it just looks like the way I made it... it literally ‘is’ what it is about—appropriating, or stealing, various disparate texts and cutting and pasting them together to create something sort of new.

Obviously this could have been my Frankenstein manifesto! And that did occur to me when I’d written the monster manifestos... that this one was very much more monstrous than any of them.

It was made with a photocopier, a vivid, and a pink highlighter... it was very honest. And very bare.

And since when did you care about honesty!? [Laughs]
The Hybrid Practitioner Manifesto, May 2004.
They said: "Hey!—coffee cups can be more beautiful than fancy sculptures. A kiss in the morning can be more dramatic than a drama by Mr. Foote." The surprise.

Let's abandon ourselves, as a 'The Dice Man.' Until we can do this we are still MODERN...

> POSTMODERNITY so far has seen us agree to accept other ideologies as valid...

> BUT: we still adhere to specific ideologies that suit us... we often have to much tied up in them to throw them out or contradict them - they make our EGO - our sense of ourselves > our IDENTITY... our style.

Eclecticism, then, is a way of attacking the machinery of delimitation that creates the imaginative boundaries that must limit not only our aesthetic experiences but also our political and social practices. Appropriation is therefore, the same process that was operating when Harriet Brooks, Seurat wrote Leda and the Swan, when Debussy wrote

like an ir
Bible appro
simple str
brain app
sardonic do see
reconstr
recent ar
ing-perfo

goes against appropriation and forgery. As disqualifying itself as art, in fact, he
does go to great lengths to reconstruct his chosen subjects as accurately as possible. "When I was a kid," Ditko said transfer: "I used to love to use tracing paper. And I always found forgery fascinating, whether it was art or printing money."

12. An appropriation of imagery but also an appropriation of the power of that imagery. Artists involved in appropriation are now

13. [Picture of text]

14. The future of art might... It is in its past. This is a principal belief of the post-modernist outlook, rejecting the notion of aesthetic—or, for that matter, social—progress. Postmodernism does not simply resist progress, allowing for wholesale resurrection of the past; it encourages critical reconsideration and dissection of this past... pastiche as the ideal form of creative critical activity, as Auseinandersetzung (to use one of Derrida's favorite German words), the coming together of a writer...
> The Hybrid Practitioner continually seeks out borders/boundaries in which to situate their practice...

> these borders exist in flux and will shift constantly also.

> The borders are rich melting pots of opposites and extremes, high-brow and low-brow, between the literary and the popular, and between competing ethnicities and conflicting desires...

> they are where EVOLUTION is happening.

In each other's veins - Opposites attract but do not dissolve to any

Promiscuity is normal; such separating things as love, hatred, friendship are superseded by a more realistic and logical passion.

The human soul will never, like a wave, throw the turbulent, the antidote.

> The Hybrid practitioner will collect, sample and appropriate from either side of any border, nothing is sacred.

Contact is it in a beneficial relationship.

The contours of identity are developed against and within a shifting and mutable environment.

As the environment evolves, design strategies must also evolve if they are to function. Design

THE REAL ELVIS CAN BE FOUND IN THE BORDERS. SHOULD ELVIS BE ONCE?

THE HYBRID PRACTITIONER...
47. It is indisputable that the roots of the taxonomic urge are biological, widespread, and downright useful. However, it is important to understand that taxonomy is an interpretive device. In nature, there are many, of course. In humans, it is a second interpretation. A diversity of interactors is needed for proper functioning of ecosystems; there are many roles to play. The reason why we cannot be much more stable than we are is that life is not stable.

48. It also serves as a simple reminder that nothing is neutral. Increasing the legibility of the world through uniformity denies the richness of experience.

49. The most perishable colours in painting (such as Blue, Alizarin Crimson) are the most brilliant.

50. The hybrid practitioner fights the taxonomic/orthodox urge to isolate past reality, and factionalize it. It refuses to deny that Indonesians are now drinking Coca-Cola, or praying to Jesus, or that Ravi Shankar’s music has disciples in Manchester and New York, and even Saskatoon. Taxonomy’s attempt to stop time fights against life — it is a futile form of attempted resistance.

51. Chapter 12, finally, contains a summary of ‘my’ philosophy (which, of course, is not mine, but a condensation of reasonable ideas from all over the world) surrounded by answers to criticisms. It was written during a 12-month period spent amidst extensive travel across the British Empire in the late 1940s. My main point is that collaboration does not need a shared ideology.
The Boltocks

Never Mind

Here's The

Beginning? ENGI

that which they have found and sampled.

1. The Hybrid Practitioners design new questions, new problems.

2. The hybrid practitioners design new questions, new problems.

3. Here is no longer popular.

4. Important things are taking place at the moment the links appear on the never-ending chain.

5. She is only one thing better than life. Life is a game that goes very fast.

6. Contemporary animal and machine, who populate words simultaneously.

7. Kekozon's Boulder is full of Herons—creatures
The monster is our alter-ego
The monster resides in us all
A manifestation of our anxieties
A sense of impending doom.
The monster is primarily concerned with itself.
Self preservation.
Feeding it's own needs
It has no interest in saving the world.
In fact it believes that the world must be undone/destroyed to be saved.
And that this can only ever really be done on a personal level.
So you could say it's concerned with 'self-improvement'.
The monster is certainly self-obsessed.
It is not narcissistic though, as it's reflective foci are primarily it's flaws.
The monster is a 'getting-worse' so things can get better.
A bad dream
The monster is transitional
We can all become monstrous in moments of transformation and change
The monster is marginal, but we prefer the term 'peripheral'.
Of course you can’t focus on the peripheral, and the monster can only be seen, or documented, in hindsight.
Often accidentally (you only see it when the film’s developed for instance)
It ‘becomes’ through an intense process of reflection
Too long spent in front of the mirror
It is there all the time in the things we don’t normally notice.
It is seeing ourselves in places we wouldn’t normally think to look
In the shadows, in the wardrobe, under the bed.
The edge of everyday.
The monster is all loose-ends and bad connections
You don’t know what to do with it/yourself at the time
It is all questions and no answers
The monster can never be satiated
It is extremely frustrated
The cause of it’s anger and destructive impulses
But it is rich with complexity and possibility
Which can never be adequately articulated
Never finished, whole, or complete
It is always on the move
Travelling
El Dorado
The monster, like the werewolf, will come and go.
To remain monstrous too long is to risk death
On awakening we can begin to try to understand our monstrous selves.
Attempting to articulate that which we have destroyed
To begin to negotiate our newly disrupted, and more complex world
The monster leaves us with a sense of the peripheral
Dwelling in the borderlands of the place we knew too well
We are reinvented, reinvigorated,and we have work to do.

Hot Rod Biology presents their second attempt at a manifesto for monstrosity
in which we ourselves become monstrous in search of further opportunities for personal development

The manifesto on this page was a sort of summative attempt. As such it was a bit too reflective I think... in the sense that it’s about what had happened, rather than projecting what should. I struggled to produce another manifesto anywhere near as good as the first one... the Manifesto for the Hybrid Practitioner. And by good I just mean that it had ‘teeth’. Surreptitiously, that first one—the most monstrous of them all—has been working it’s dark magic all along, and some of the ideas in it are only really evolving into my work now. It feels ridiculous to admit that I hadn’t really thought about my own ‘hybrid practice’ as a designer/musician until very recently, because—in hindsight—it’s been in that space between those domains, my double life, that I’ve eventually been able to re-engage.
DRUMMER WANTED

THE REV. HOLDEN GUNN WANTS YOU!
FOR HIS...
Hot-Rod Biology

CALL NOW! 917.250.2103 OR EMAIL: REV.HOLDENGUNN@YAHOO.COM
LET'S GO GET A BEER & TALK ROCK 'N' ROLL
Humour

A sense of humour has obviously played an important role in this phase of my research—another example of something of the spirit within my tendencies as a musician/performer leaking over into my generally more ‘dry’ practice as a graphic designer.

EXAGGERATION

Too big! Fundamental to the provocative agency of any monster is some exaggerated feature(s). These posters were a bit like my first movie in the sense that I didn’t know what I’d done until I’d done it. I’d gone all over Brooklyn putting them up at night, and then the next day when I walked down the street and saw one... this huge pictures of myself and all these people walking around! I all of a sudden felt very conspicuous and embarrassed. I’d been talking about narcissism a bit, but I wasn’t even really trying to create a monster with this. But here it was... quite accidentally, the product of a deranged mind (I was new to the city).
January 28, 2006

How not to advertise for a drummer

How to advertise for a drummer in New York City...

It seems I have inadvertently created a monster here... oxgenated, too big, out on it's own. It doesn't look like what it's supposed to be... I've seen a lot of people stop and look at it but so far I've only had one response...

From:_______@hotmail.com
To:rev.holdinggun@yahoo.com
Subject:Drummer
Date:Tue, 24 Jan 2006 01:34:34 +0000

______ is a very famous drummer in Europe.
Since his very young age, he has worked with very well known artists
from all around the world, such as Alpha Blondy, Mory Kanté, Luther
Alison, Koba (Bork), Mabon (Bootsy Collins), St.Germain, Delegation,
Village People, Emery Thompson (Massive Attack), among others...

He has recently composed Luc Besson's last film (Bienvenue 13). He currently lives in New York where he plays with the haitian singer Michou, lead
of the band Mengine, a trip rock pulsad with a tribal percussive backbeat.

He is always open to know different artists from all different musical styles and backgrounds, as long as they got the right groove...

contact:_______@hotmail.fr
or:_______@menagerie_______@hotmail.com
... perhaps you need to know me to get the humour in that? Of course I'm pleased though that I even got any feedback (although to be honest I did expect that I'd be pretty much ignored in drummers by now!), but want to pick up on a couple of things that I think the response points to...

The poster looks far too professional (out of place), and I'm assuming this is to do with its size and its design, especially to the image at the top of the post (inside board in Union Square). The poster says really clearly "Technically proficient not required", but the size and design obviously override the what the text says (misunderstood/read aesthetically rather than textually)? Also, people (well this person) haven't noticed or engaged with the map in the background... which I intended as a kind of pointer as to the kind of stuff I was interested in playing.

This poster then has been a failure (although they're still all up... and who knows maybe I'll get another bite or two). I could easily have gone and put up "Posters" written by hand, or type-set in Microsoft Word, but I liked the idea that these posters could be a good way to look back into my research this year... and in a different way. Only I hadn't expected them to be about my research in the way that they are... and so in their failure they're also kind of perfect.

I've been re-reading my first monstrous manifests from last year and also looking back at the living The Monster (DVD) image, and this could easily have been a direct outcome of that. What I find interesting about this is how it's like I have to have forgotten what I was trying to do and then 6 months later I just come out naturally... when you're not looking, when you least expect it (which is another thing about monsters... they're never there when you look for them, you only ever see them out of the corner of your eye).

In her book ‘Manifesto: a Century of Isms’ Mary Ann Caws talks about metaphor as an “organising principle” common to the conventions of the manifesto—the volcano, the tree, Malevich’s Black Square... you’ve used The Monster. You’ve also described it as a “generative metaphor”. Can you explain what you mean?

Sure... ummm... this is a big question. Obviously, as I’ve sort of explained, the ‘monster’ was something that emerged slowly from the early projects, and I only tried to describe it—it’s use—later...

—in hindsight!

Yeah...

I’d been throwing the term ‘generative’ around ever since Lisa used it during my first trip to Melbourne—a “generative exercise”, she called it. It immediately resonated with my desire— which I couldn’t really articulate at the time—to sort of re-invent my practice... to regenerate my interest in graphic design. So I started using the term without really thinking about it... just sort of saying it enough until one day it made sense and sort of brought some things to light, you know.

Sure.

The monster evolved quite separately to this idea to begin with, and it was only over time that I began to see that they were directly related.

Do you remember how or when that happened?

Actually to be honest I think it came from a reading on Schon? I’d thought I’d better try a little harder to get my head around this reflective practitioner stuff, and I came across this idea of a ‘generative metaphor’. Of course that immediately put my monster and my vague use of the term ‘generative’ together... one of those “I can’t believe I didn’t see this myself” moments!

So this ‘generative metaphor’...

— for Schon, was obviously about learning. How we use metaphors to learn about things or concepts we don’t immediately understand, or recognise... you can see how this relates to the idea of monstrosity. A monster—Frankenstein’s is a good example—is often a manifestation of an abstract or particular fear or anxiety which is shared by the culture at large, but which remains unarticulated. It is a metaphor for some underlying nondescript sense of unease. A lot of metaphors actually are generative in this sense— they enable a new, or ‘better’ understanding of an unknown concept by relating it to something else. You know, ‘this’ is sort of like ‘that’— the unknown is enlightened through analogous relation to the known... that’s what Schon was interested in I think.

Ok so is this how you were then using the metaphor of monstrosity?

How do you mean?

Well, trying to articulate certain aspects of your practice metaphorically... through the monster?

Hmmm... sort of I guess...

What I mean is, your own fears and anxieties—you tried to explore them through the metaphor of monstrosity?

Well yeah... but that sounds too simple. Easy even. If you think about what you just said it’s very complicated... and convoluted.
But you're sort of right. The monster was a mirror... initially. That I could point at my work. But then—slowly—I got brave enough to turn the mirror onto myself... and obviously I myself was the monster. I had been all along... it felt quite ridiculous to realise that.

I’d like to talk more about that monstrous transition—I feel like it’s important, I guess it’s why I’m here—but we’re getting ahead of ourselves because you haven’t really described how you thought the monster, or the metaphor, was actually being ‘put to work’ in the first place yet?

Well you know me... it was never that precise... there was never any hypothesis. I tried out a lot of different things. You remember I titled one of my seminars “A Manifesto for Monstrosity: Chasing a Metaphor”? I really liked that title, and I still do. I like the idea of chasing after a metaphor... applying it differently to it's referent—seeing where it is most resonant... where it generates the most feedback.

But looking back now I can see that the one key ingredient to all my monsters was provocation... I was trying to use them to provoke... well, myself mostly.
The Dynamics of Monstrosity

- Exaggeration
- Anxiety
- Ridiculousness
- Transgression
- Alienation
- Fear
- Disruption
- Disturbance
- Unfamiliar
- Inexplicable
- Unexpected
- Dislocation
- Dangerous
- Difference
- Metaphor
- Unholy
- Illegitimate
- Grotesque
- Mutation
- Ugly
- Transformative
- Pain
- Noisy
- Chaotic
- Unknown
- Failure
One of the most provocative things I’ve encountered throughout this research has been what I’m doing right now—writing. I’ve struggled to find the words. And then to bolt them together in some satisfactory way. I’ve come to really enjoy this particular form of pain and suffering though... and it leads us nicely into my final chapter here, Engagement.
The blog?

Yeah.

How do you mean?

Well, in the sense that it often felt like I was talking to myself!

What, like now?

Yes. It worked in a similar way. It was useful for me to be able to push, or provoke, myself. I mean I’d imagine Lisa or Laurene reading it now and then... and Yoko. But mostly I used the blog like a personal diary, a journal—an interior monologue.

I was excited when I discovered that there was a connection to eighteenth century horror writing there... the ‘epistolary novel’.

Sure. Can we stick to this idea about talking to yourself for now though... I’ve been wondering if we’ve ended up in this position, at least partly, because of your feeling that you don’t fit into any immediate community of practice?

Absolutely. The isolation... geographic isolation I mean. There really is nobody in Christchurch to talk to about what I’m doing. The best conversations I have are with my students... and as much as I enjoy them...

—they’re not really provocative?

That’s right.

So you set up these arguments in your head?

I guess...

Perhaps that’s why you never like anything you do immediately?

I suppose?

---

Closely related to the idea that you are working in isolation—at the “arse end of the world”, as you put it—is the fact that you have been doing this Masters at a distance. I’m bringing this up now because I think it’s why you became so very much more involved with the ‘blogging’, than did anyone else in your group... who were all based in Melbourne.

Quite early on the blog gave me something to structure my efforts around. That idea of scaffolding again. I spent so much time feeling stuck—not knowing where or how to start— but in these situations I sort of discovered that I could always sit down and write something... anything!

Not that that was easy though. I mean that’s how I sort of discovered my masochistic enjoyment of writing... I couldn’t design anything. I couldn’t think of a project... but I’d force myself to sit down every couple of nights and at least write something... anything.

It was often a very painful exercise. I’m not a natural writer— I really do struggle. I write incredibly slowly... but I get a real kick out of it sometimes. When I eventually manage to say something ‘well’... to make sense of a vague idea. It’s like making an apparition—a ghost— momentarily
tangible.

There’s a song by The White Stripes I quite like, where Jack White describes falling in love “with a pretty little ghost”, and how when he holds her he’s “really holding air”… or something like that.

I mean it sounds stupid—quite naïve, and a bit romantic… but it’s partly what I’m looking for—monsters, voodoo, ghosts… magic!

Do you mean to imply that you can find these things in writing more than design?

Probably it’s just because I know less about it… it’s new to me, and I’m approaching it quite naïvely. So it’s still spooky and magical. It has a power I don’t quite understand… whereas design, ‘graphic design’, has been so demystified… you know?

Partly my attraction to writing about design, I think, has something to with a desire to re-mystify graphic design… for myself at least. To engage with it—parts of it—as unknown?

A gain I’m being very honest here!

---

You’ve mentioned that ‘writing’ has been a key discovery for you, and that it represents the biggest shift in your practice since you’ve undertaken this research. You’ve said that you find writing very difficult, but that in this sense it is also very provocative for you—that it “provokes you to figure things out”, and to “articulate vague ideas into useful statements”.

You’ve been showing me through your blog, and it’s obviously where you’ve—perhaps unconsciously—developed this ‘skill’, if you don’t mind me calling it that.

It’s been a long slow road to realising how important that blog has been to me. I still don’t like admitting that. [Laughs]… blogs are so ubiquitous right now… and most are so vacuous and pathetic. I hate even admitting to people that I have one.

But yeah, calling it a “skill” is a bit strong I think. I don’t feel very ‘skilled’! And I’m not sure I want to be… I mean that’s not what I’m aiming at—to be a good writer. I’m more interested in… well, the role writing can play as a reflective action or process.

Hmmm… so you’re fairly cynical about blogs in general, yet you want to encourage writing as a reflective process? What’s the difference between your blog and the one’s you say are “vacuous and pathetic”?

Well there’s a big difference between being critically reflective and just spouting off your opinions or writing down what you’ve been up to lately!

The internet encourages voyeurism and narcissism simultaneously… and I guess I have to acknowledge that while I’ve felt a bit narcissistic at times—always talking about myself—I’ve tended to focus on my problems, and flaws.

The writing I’ve been practising has been for the sake of my own personal development—an exercise in self-improvement… although that sounds a bit Oprah!

So you don’t care if nobody ever reads it?
Chapter 3
Engagement

The monster is put to bed...
Disenchantment > Provocation > Engagement

Within this chapter I want to show that something good has eventually come of all this introspection, disruption, and anxiety. Typically, this has occurred peripherally... in the margins of the places I was actually attempting to look.

While I aimed hard at the projects within the constantly moving target of my research, my re-engagement and reinvention happened almost without my noticing it in the end. And mostly this final chapter is about a publication project I’ve been working on called *The National Grid*. This project was never conceived of as being a part of this masters—in fact I actively sought to keep it separate for a long time, lest its involvement in my research should ‘kill it’ somehow!

It is from within this project however, that the clearest picture of a regenerated interest in graphic design has emerged. And while I naively imagined this project as distinct from my research, the two have inevitably been intricately intertwined. So much so that in hindsight I now see *The National Grid* project as both a major and direct outcome of the practice-led research I’ve undertaken over the last three years.

Other people
One of the key discoveries within my research through and about practice has been the importance and effect of the community the practice is situated in. My own disenchantment with Graphic Design has had much to do with this. In this respect *The National Grid* project has been invaluable in opening up connections to a like-minded community.

Firstly, the project is a collaborative one, and, as a designer, this is something that is entirely new to me. The roles of publishing, editing, designing, and distributing have been shared by myself and a similarly disenchanted graphic designer friend, Jonty Valentine. While we share in a certain disdain for the pragmatics of industry, I want to point out that we are also very different in respect to our interests in design, and working together has not been without its difficulties.

Of course the collaborative nature of the project gives it some of the spirit of playing in a band. A response perhaps to an earlier research question; how could design be as much fun as playing in a band? And so in part, at least, I want to acknowledge the inevitable tension that comes from working with others—the disagreements, the clashing of consequence—as provocative, and fundamentally engaging, moments within the practice.

Secondly, a project like this obviously requires many people to be involved, as contributors initially, but as an audience also. And one of the most engaging parts of this project for me has been the development a network—a community—of interested people.

While initially our focus had only really been New Zealand, one of the nicer surprises of this project has been its capacity to enable us to approach and communicate with other practitioners and writers internationally.

An obvious influence, and indeed a catalyst, for our project has been the Dutch publication *Dot Dot Dot*. In New York earlier this year, I was lucky enough to meet Stuart Bailey, editor of *Dot Dot Dot*, and talk with him about our own project. I’ve been in contact with Stuart many times since regarding my research, editorial advice, and life in general. I’m including him here (name-dropping) because he’s a good example of the kind of highly valuable ‘practice-rich’ relationship that *The National Grid* project is helping to facilitate. Stuart has also written us letters of support for funding, helped get the publication reviewed in IDEA Magazine, and is also distributing *The National Grid* through his project Dexter Sinister.

I also need to acknowledge here the initial importance of my involvement with the students and supervisors of the postgraduate program at RMIT University in Melbourne. Prior to my involvement in this course my practice as a graphic designer was highly isolated, and these ‘other people’ in particular represent the real beginning of my engagement with any sort of community of practice in design.

Terms and conditions
Alongside the ongoing location of a more engaging community of practice has been my increasing interest in talking about design. A major shift in my practice—generated from within my research and evidenced by *The National Grid* project—has been a developing interest in writing. This shift has been part of my moving away from form and process based investigations—pulling my focus—to a broader more epistemological investigation of my practice in design.

Throughout this research program, and through the realisation of my disenchantment, I have discovered an interest in language and discourse—in how the language the practice is packaged in tends to shape
our understanding of it, and of the way it is (or should be) done. While this has not been central to my research, the discovery and use of writing as a reflective tool should be seen as an emerging practice-led investigation of this idea (one I intend to develop further through my work on The National Grid).

I want to attribute a good deal of my rekindled interest in Graphic Design to the reflective writing exercises I have undertaken during this research—largely on the web-log I’ve kept, but also in The National Grid, and for certain other publications. I’ve mentioned elsewhere that I’ve found writing difficult, but also very useful in terms of developing a more personally resonant frame of reference—the terms and conditions of my engagement with Graphic Design.

Self-awareness
Having negotiated the horror of my own reflection, I have been transformed into a willingly reflective practitioner. Of course an obvious outcome of this is a much greater sense of self-awareness, improving my ability to navigate and negotiate the murkiness of the domain that I am trying to inhabit. I know more where to direct my energy, efforts, and attention, and I have enough confidence and optimism to take on a large scale self-initiated project like The National Grid.

Just as disenchantment, provocation, and engagement have worked more fluidly, more interdependently, than I’m describing them here, my realisations about community, language, and practice are also bound up within one another in reality. I realise now—in hindsight of course—that much of my trouble coming up with projects earlier on in this research was symptomatic of the fact that I didn’t even really have a ‘practice’... at least, not in the sense that I do now. By this I mean that, due to a lack of reflection and self-awareness, I was unable to apply a frame to my practice. ‘Practice’ wasn’t a word I ever used, let alone thought about, and I struggled to decide what was important to me and what was not. And so another key discovery for me over the past couple of years has been the importance of the reflective opportunities provided by self-initiated or self-motivated work.

Way out
In the end what I really want to show of this experience is that it is not over. That the best is, I think (fingers crossed), to come. So within this last chapter, and by my inclusion of the first issue of The National Grid with this submission, I hope to exhibit some sort of generative trajectory out from the Masters program into a more deeply engaged and sustainable practice. This is how I will be evaluating it’s success... in hindsight.

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1. Please find a copy of issue #1 of The National Grid with this publication. For further issues or more information please visit the website www.thenationalgrid.co.nz
2. My inability to engage with a community of practice is discussed in chapter 1, Disenchantment.
4. There are currently no publications in New Zealand that focus specifically on Graphic Design. The discipline is served only by one publication, Prodesign (published by the Designer’s Institute of New Zealand), whose content is predominantly advertorial and trade related.
5. Dexter Sinister: Just In Time Workshop and Occasional Bookstore. 38 Ludlow St, Lower East Side, New York City. www.dextersinister.org
6. See texts on pages 137, 152, and 161.
Self-portrait as monster (‘Designwolf’). Digital photograph, February 2006.
February 18, 2006

**Meeting your maker (with particular reference to Bruce Mau)...**

Who makes you feel monstrous? How? Why?

What do you have in common? Does that scare you?

I photographed myself as a monster yesterday. I was supposed to be a werewolf... but the make-up didn't really work out looking like that. It concerns me a little that I look more 'demonic' than 'monstrous'... I guess I like the idea that a monster is just kind of misunderstood, and can be rendered useful via some kind of understanding (Dylan mentions this about werewolves in my interview with him). The demon however... hmmm I'm not sure... pure evil perhaps, but it still works as a manifestation of the peripheral I think. This was kind of a practice run before I do the shoot with George (if we ever get around to it)... but when I was doing it I realised I was thinking about thinking about why I've said that I don't want the monster to be a critique of industry, but I thought about what I wrote after the Bruce Mau talk... being in "The Church of Mau", and now I feel like a monster.

Then when I went to find images of him I realised that there's a lot of what he's about that I actually engage with... like this:

"The studio is the EXCITING thing. The projects are the NECESSARY thing."

and the:

"...every person, every project represents an INFINITELY COMPLEX SET OF RELATIONSHIPS. Finding the exact balance between the right people and the right projects is the key to sustaining a flourishing studio"

from here. Both comments resonate with the way I feel about The National Grid Project.

So I feel monstrous because I don't share an interest in 'saving the world' or in 'the public good'. I feel more destructive than constructive. But yes we do have things in common... an interest beyond 'making'... in practice, and the peripheral interactions that feed that.

Is that scary? Kinda... it makes me realise that maybe I do want to 'save the world'? But I'd say it's in a much more selfish way - it's about saving 'my world', and that I'd be seeking to destroy it in order to rebuild it...

I like things to be a bit fucked up. And that's the difference between me and Bruce I think.

**Posted by Luke Wood at February 18, 2006 04:16 AM**
31. Crisis. Writing . . . ?

Today is my 31st birthday. I think it's related that I've been quite stressed out over the last couple of weeks? Where has my life gone? What am I doing? I don't want to bore anyone with the details of my petty anxiety though. What I wanted to talk about here is what I thought about last night . . . I totally freaked out about my research topic. It all of a sudden seemed so shallow, self-indulgent, and formal (I'm sure the respect it is essentially about aesthetics, I think), I tried to convince myself that it was bigger than I realized, multifaceted perhaps . . . I tried to visualise it, seeing the monster metaphor as the centrepiece of a bigger research question. I drew it . . .

I felt much happier having drawn this, and I came home from the office feeling a little better. Tim cooked a roast.

Lying in bed I was too much too early I couldn't sleep. I thought about a whole lot of stuff, mainly about getting older and seeing my peers owning houses, having kids, etc. . . . but then (and I'm not sure how these related exactly, but I'm sure it does) I got back to thinking about my research topic (my own investment in a future perhaps)?

I'm trying to recall the connections . . . I remember I talked to Aaron about his essay yesterday. He's not enjoying writing it, and said he can't wait till next year when he'll only have to 'make work' (he's how Masters works at Canterbury). I said I'd liked writing, and actually not made much work yet for my own Masters. Malcolm criticised me for this too . . . always reading and writing and not 'working'.

Lying awake I remembered Laurene catching a glimpse of my workbook last time I was in Melbourne. She mentioned that it was interesting that it was full of writing, that there were no sketches, drawings, or whatever, and I started thinking about the amount of writing I've done since the beginning of last year. I've never really written much before, but last year and into my research I wrote what was supposed to be a book review that turned into an article on 'appropriation', my topic at the time. Since then I seem to have written a lot . . . other articles, seminars, manifestos, notes in my workbook, and of course this blog. So it occurred to me that this was potentially an interesting thread in my research, Writing?

I don't think I'm necessarily good at it, but I don't think that's important. Why does it bug other people, and reciprocally me, that I'm writing MORE than I am 'designing'? Why am I enjoying writing? Why don't more designers write? Is it because, supposedly, we don't read? My own writing has certainly come with a huge increase in my reading.

I started thinking about The National Grid. Whatever we might say about it, it is fundamentally a project for writing. I thought about how it was really easy to engage people (designers) initially with the project, i.e., everyone thinks it's a great idea. But then how hard it's been to actually get people to contribute? Even in a brief and non-commital way 0 through the blog.

So what I'm really wondering here is . . . a change in topic? Am I crazy? Is this just a pathetic mid-life crisis? It doesn't feel wrong though, in that it doesn't feel like a huge change . . . just a different focus on what I've already been doing. And isn't that what good practical research is?

The last thing I want to say about it all is this: I feel like the Monster Metaphor topic can only go so far, or reach a certain level. I feel like I can see where it's going. The Writing/Design topic, I think, has a lot more potential to go further (what do I mean by that?), and maybe it's more in sync with the direction my practical life is heading. Maybe it's a Doctorate though . . . I need to remember that this is 'just a Masters'.

If you've read this far, I'm sorry. But it is my birthday.

"The secret to creativity is knowing how to hide your sources"

[Albert Einstein quoted in Prodesign June/July 2001]

Typography 24: The Annual of the Type Director’s Club [2003] is the result and product of the forty-ninth Type Directors Club competition. I’m not a big fan of competitions. About ten years ago, three of my best friends and I entered the ‘Battle of the Bands’. We thought we were pretty good, but the judges didn’t, and we never got past the first gig at Warners. It hurt our pride. That particular band never felt the same again, and I swore I’d never enter another competition of any sort.

This experience is obviously lurking somewhere in the back of my mind as I undertake to review this publication—a catalogue of “winners”. But also, and perhaps more importantly, there’s the recurring experience of visiting studios where books, like this one, are open on designers’ desks and marked at certain pages—from which designers appear to be blatantly trawling for ‘good ideas’. I have in fact recently been in a situation whereby I have come across a similar book marked at a page containing work that had been copied, literally—colour for colour, form for form, typeface for typeface, etc—and was at that moment due to be pitched to a paying client!

So I guess I’m a little cynical. I feel like I’m going to have to dig deep in order to be impartial. So let’s start with some history...

The Type Directors Club (TDC) was founded in 1946, in New York City. The same time and place in which Paul Rand wrote his first book, Thoughts on Design, outlining the principals and ideas behind the work that saw his meteoric rise from the bullpens of Esquire to Art Director (or Art Dictator) with William H. Weintraub & Co. The following year, while the creative mafia vied for positions of power and importance during the rapid expansion of advertising in post-war America, the TDC founded a lecture series that over the next ten years became somewhat of an institution within the American advertising and design industry.

The lecture series of 1954 concluded with an exhibition containing fifty samples of work, and the TDC Typography Show was born. The exhibitions were a hit, and while the lecture series soon came to an end, the annual exhibition grew, both in size and generated interest. The TDC’s current membership list includes professionals and students from over 31 countries around the world.

In its early years, a modest black and white catalogue of works featured in the exhibition was distributed via an insert to the magazine Art Direction. By 1979 though, the decision was made to produce the catalogue as a book in its own right. This move was confidently marked by the title of the new full colour publication, Typography 1.

Sitting here now with Typography 24 on my desk, and where it has come from in mind, I can’t help but feel a little nostalgic... previous awards have gone to a number of my old heroes; Rand of course, Bob Gill, Milton Glaser, Herb Lubalin, Takenobu Igarashi... but also some more recent ones, such as Lorraine Wild, House Industries and Chris Ware. There’s a surprisingly diverse cross section of both big and small names from the last five decades in graphic design—a “who’s who of design history”, the introduction to Typography 24 proudly proclaims. And, indeed, this edition too contains work by ‘names’ such as J. Abbott Miller, Stefan Sagmeister, Piet Schreuders, Vince Frost, Garry Emery, and even Michael Bierut (who’s still doing the modernist thing with Pentagram). Paula Scher and Fred Woodward (the Rolling Stone guy), are in here, and seem to have a good thing going as they both appear to have had work in almost every annual for about the last decade.

As good as this might sound though, there is no history lesson here. The annuals don’t really offer any contextual background to the work, and any evaluation one might make of a piece via its inclusion here, can only be superficial at best. The blurb on the inside back cover tells us the judge’s
comments, the designer’s statements, and the Chairman’s blurb “exemplify the enormous vitality
of the typography profession today”. This isn’t true. Ninety percent of the work represented does
not come with a ‘designer’s statement’. Only those lucky enough to be picked out for inclusion
in the ‘Judge’s Choice’ section are given this opportunity, and apart from one or two instances,
these token texts tell us little more than what we can plainly see. The judge’s comments are equally
uninformative, and the Chairman’s statement is just a bullet-pointed pat on the back for anyone
showing more than a passing interest in type.

However, the TDC Annual is obviously not intended to be a textually heavy critical analysis of
contemporary graphic design (although this would make perfect sense, after all critical decisions
have been made, I presume). The real value in the publication as is, lies in its ability to introduce us
to the work of other designers, that we might otherwise, remain unaware of. The key then, as to the
real function of this publication, is to view it as a collection of links that should be followed up in
greater depth... elsewhere.

As a design community we’re all interested in various, different aspects of process and practice,
and all have our own specific motivations. A real feather in the cap of the Type Director’s Club, and
something I must admit, I hadn’t expected, is that many of those various approaches and interests
are represented in the annuals.

To begin to pick out work to discuss from this year’s annual is problematic. The lack of any
supporting information makes this a frustrating, and perhaps futile, process. Sagmeister Inc’s
“M magazine Pages” [page 127 in the annual] are a good example— an interesting collection of
images, although what they are for, or about, remains a mystery.

However there do seem to be examples that suffer less. Bodyface [page 257] by Kiki Katahira,
a student of Sagmeister’s, appears to be the work of some flesh fetishist, peeping-tom typographer.
It’s voyeuristic, intriguing, and strangely legible. I like it.

Charles S. Anderson’s cover for eDesign magazine [page 139] stands out as he walks a fine line
—he manages to use vernacular ‘found’ typography in such a way that the result is not merely an
appropriation of naïve form, but also not overly wrought in the hands of the designer.

Appropriation of a different kind seems evident in a series of advertisements for St Mary’s Church
[page 158]. One assumes the London based designer, Paul Belford, would surely have been aware
of Damien Hirst’s series of screenprints titled The Last Supper [1999], where the artist draws a
connection between pills and religion. While the concept is slightly different, the fact that formally
the advertisements could be a continuation of Hirst’s series asks fundamental questions about the
act of appropriation. The designer may have appropriated the artwork in this case, but the artwork
appropriates the work of the designer in the first instance.

Interesting issue, if you’re that way inclined. But of course all of this comes through prior
knowledge from other sources. And that’s my point again. A book like this will only ever provide
superficial links to more important underlying ideas about our work as graphic designers.

Having had a thorough look through Typography 24, I don’t feel any need to keep it, which is good
because I don’t think that was part of the deal. I won’t be rushing out to buy my own copy either.

My advice? Get your boss to buy it for the studio, or borrow it from someone else... but take out the
post-it notes when the client comes in to see how innovative you are.

This is the first published text I ever wrote (Prodesign 70, April/May
2004). I was invited to write a book review and this is what came
out—less about the book and more about my experience of these
kinds of books I guess. Obviously this text could have been in
chapter 1, Disenchantment, but I’m putting it here, in Engagement,
because I quite enjoyed writing it.

The beginning of my discovery of writing as a way to work through
my thoughts and ideas about things. It was supposed to be much
shorter (500 words)—I never ‘planned’ what I would write though,
I just sat down and wrote it. When I finished I didn’t much care
whether they would use it or not because I didn’t like the
publication. They did use it though. In fact they ‘used’ it as a feature
article instead of a review... pointing, I guess, to the potential of
cynicism and disenchantment to be engaging.
THE NATIONAL GRID

A pilot publication for practitioner research in communication design

RATIONALE

The National Grid is a project inspired by a concern for the prolonged lack of critical discourse about graphic design in New Zealand. The discipline is currently served by a single publication, 'ProDesign', the journal of the Designers Institute of New Zealand (DINZ). Prodesign's focus, however, is entirely commercial. Its content is predominantly adverstorial- and trade-related articles: how to get a job, how to run a successful studio, new products. As a result, its readership is limited and many practitioners look elsewhere for critical thinking about contemporary practice.

Recent government-led initiatives such as the Design Taskforce and Better By Design have identified the design industry as a key player in New Zealand's economic future. The pressure is on for New Zealand to become a more design-savvy nation. Currently, the focus of such initiatives is almost solely on the business community as the commissioner and client of design. There is, as yet, no real focus on the development of the discipline that actually provides the service.

OBJECTIVES

As a collaborative project between practitioners, professionals, academics, educators, and historians, The National Grid aims to develop a forum for practitioner-centred discussion on graphic and communication design.

The National Grid project has four key objectives:
1. To document and communicate contemporary design practice within New Zealand.
2. To communicate research in design in New Zealand.
3. To archive and disseminate the history of New Zealand communication design.
4. To enable and promote a critical discourse among New Zealand designers.

Within this last objective lies a desire to develop the project as a bridge between the often seemingly disparate interests of the Academy and the Profession. The National Grid, as a research project itself, will explore the different motivations, languages, and products of academia and the professional studio environment, and where these meet and overlap.

In the short term the primary focus/goal of the National Grid is to begin to create a distinctively New Zealand voice in the field. This will, however, not be at the exclusion of international contributions. A potential long-term goal of the project is to establish an international peer review process.

OUTCOMES

The National Grid project has initially been set up as a website and web-log (www.thenationalgrid.co.nz) which is acting as a point of contact for interested parties and as a site to generate discussion on the project. The principle outcome from the project will be a bi-annual print publication containing articles, images, and projects submitted via the website or commissioned by the editorial board of The National Grid publication. We see that as a publication that is concerned with critiquing the visual and material (as well as the intertextual) quality of graphic design, it is necessary that we produce a print publication where the physical, artifactual result and presentation is as relevant as the literary discourse.

Our intention is to locate the tone and content of the publication between a design magazine and an academic journal, in an attempt to reach a diverse audience interested in engaging with contemporary design in a thoughtful and intelligent way. The most influential international graphic design publications – Dot Dot Dot (The Netherlands), Emigré (USA), and Eye (UK), position themselves in a similar way. The expected audience for the publication is professional designers,
Memorandum

School of Fine Arts
Office: Room 211, Block 2
Extension: 6161
Email: desmond.rochfort@canterbury.ac.nz

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To:</th>
<th>Luke Wood</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From:</td>
<td>Professor Desmond Rochfort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
<td>11 October 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject:</td>
<td>Harkness Fund Application</td>
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Dear Luke

I am writing to advise you that the Harkness Fund Committee very much supported your application and has agreed to award your application $6,138 towards the costs of your proposal.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely

Desmond Rochfort
Head of School
Coffee and conversation

I’ve said elsewhere that collaboration isn’t the ‘point’ I’m trying to make here, although it’s obviously an important part of The National Grid project... and I guess it’s a piece of the overall puzzle (the monstrous jigsaw I mentioned earlier).

While The National Grid was something that had been in my head for a while, it didn’t really begin to take shape until I began talking about it to collaborator and friend, Jonty Valentine.

I’d imagined it being a cheap, quick and easy fanzine type thing—photocopied and staple bound (I guess the fact I wanted to do this at all points to a desire for some sort deeper engagement with design). I’d never gotten past being a vague and romantic idea though... I sort of realised I couldn’t do it on my own—I didn’t have the confidence, and I didn’t really know anyone who would I thought would be interested in being involved.

I’d known Jonty for a while... but never ‘well’, more sort of peripherally... we’d lived in the same small town for a while, but that was years ago. We’d both been living overseas since and hadn’t stayed in touch at all. Funnily enough we were reunited by his surprise appearance on the panel of my first review at RMIT.

About a year later, shortly after I’d written my second article for Prodesign, Jonty was down from Auckland visiting family in Christchurch. We were keen to catch up again—mostly I wanted to talk to him about his own postgraduate experience. but our caffeine fuelled conversation turned towards a general bitch session about the state of graphic design in New Zealand. I quickly realised I had found a fellow cynic—somebody as disenchanted as I was!

At some point Jonty mentioned an interest in writing—in fact I think he’d already started on the piece he eventually published in our first issue. I told him that I’d started writing some things for Prodesign, and how unsatisfying that was. We talked about what we thought ‘good’ design publications were—Eye, Emigre, and Dot Dot Dot—and how it was a shame that there was really nothing worth writing for in our wee part of the world.

Of course, eventually, I told Jonty about my idea to do something... small. As the coffee took hold though, our conversation got louder and the idea grew... until we were talking about funding, and full-colour offset printing, and world-wide distribution...

---

Living in different cities at opposite ends of the country, we’ve worked on this project over-the-phone, by post, and email. We also visit each other vaguely regularly... and it’s always the same as the situation I’ve just described here. We hang out, drink coffee all day, beer at night, and generally talk over the top of each other half the time.

... and that’s what I’m talking about here.

The big picture is about company and conversation. Collaboration plays a part in it, but it’s not what motivates me.

1. See ‘History’ on page 39 of issue #1 of The National Grid.
2. Research candidates are required to give twice yearly accounts of their progress at Spring and Autumn ‘Graduate Research Conferences’.
4. I’ve never liked this publication, and I was slightly embarrassed to be writing for it. I felt I might quite like to start trying to write about design though, and I guess it seemed like a good (only?) place to start. What bugged me the most about publishing things in Prodesign was that it felt a little worthless— I knew the kinds of people that read Prodesign weren’t the kind of people that would be interested in the same things I was.
I have to admit that I'm one of those people who plays in a band and wishes I could just clone myself and play ALL the instruments. Initially I came across Salvador Dali's "Paranoid-Critical Method" in the Kooninac book "Ludicrous New York." Immediately I wanted to relate this to my anecdotage of a monstrous practice, but as The National Grid has taken up ALL my life the last couple of weeks it ended up seeping into that (I guess to be honest I'm paranoid about the reaction I'll get). Which has obviously been really interesting because it helped me see the links between what I'm doing here and what I'm doing there... I wanted to call this first issue "A Paranoid-Peripheral Publication for Graphic Design"...

... but Jonny (my co-editor) was paranoid about the negative connotations, so it's just going to be "A Paranoid-Publication for Graphic Design". We'd struggled to write the editorial together, and it's ended up as a bunch of personal/anecdotal observations. So I submitted it "More Paranoid-Critical Than Manifesto", with the following footnote...

1. Salvador Dali was interested in the ability of the paranoid mind to see and/or invent links and associations between things that are not obviously or naturally connected. He described the "Paranoid-Critical Method"—essentially attempting to stimulate a critical paranoid schizophrenia—by a "spontaneous method of rational knowledge based on the critical and systematic objectivity of the associations and interpretations of delusional phenomena".

Dali was interested how paranoid "enabled people to construct facts that weren't necessarily true or discernable to others. More precisely he wanted to be able to enact the systematicity of paranoia, where seemingly unrelated or disparate things could be put together to create new meanings, ideas, or 'facts'...true facts that had the potential to turn the world on its head. To 'prove' things that weren't true...to disrupt 'reality.' To be 'critical' involved being able to move in and out of the paranoid state so that it wasn't simply destructive but could be constructive.

There's an obvious link to my interest in the monster as metaphor there, and one that draws in my evolving intentions for this publication. I'm not just referring to the fact that both Jonny and I are deeply paranoid people...more specifically I'm interested in that idea of unexpected 'loose' connections in relation to the contentless...also I'd just say that, like John Ford, I'm generally more interested in fiction than fact. I guess I think all research is slightly 'paranoid' in the sense that it often becomes obsessive to a degree, and anything/everything begins to relate to your topic...that's paranoid basically. So of course editing the first issue of TNG Jonny and I began to see all these 'connections'... actually that's where 'Peripheral' came from...

Despite Jonny's protests I'm still going to refer to TNG as 'Paranoid-Peripheral'. I like that idea that of a kind of obsessive exploration of an edge, conspicious theories, etc...

Also, in the background somewhere, I really like the idea of claiming Salvador Dali within your lineage. I like the fact that Le Corbusier hated him (and vice versa I believe). I like the spooky (intangible) essence of Surrealism as opposed to the functional essence of Modernism. I want to believe in magic...I'm not interested in demystifying design, rather I'd like to re-mystify it...for myself anyway. I think as far as aspirations go that one can be called 'marginal' (peripheral)?

I'd like TNG to be a place where I can invite others to take part in that.

I also wrote this in the editorial:

I think it would be really interesting if graphic design could look at itself in relation to music, rather than architecture or industrial design. Then we wouldn't have to talk about problem solving, and we could talk about resonance instead.

and this:

I wanted to write something called 'Grid Theory' for this first issue. Something huge and evangelical, but ultimately compact and entirely self-contained (paranoid), like Manhattan. Anyway I ended up living in Brooklyn (peripheral) and obviously I never wrote it.

I have to admit that I'm one of those people who plays in a band and wishes I could just clone myself and play ALL the instruments. I've tended to struggle with compromising my ideas to accommodate other people's input. Interestingly I think Jonny is quite similar. Anyway we did our best to design and edit this first issue 'collaboratively'. We had a fairly common idea about how it should look—provocatively conservative—but obviously when we got started, cracks began to appear. In hindsight I remember fondly our late-night arguments and large phone bills. And while I'm not recognising collaboration as a major player in my re-engagement here, I have to admit it's been fun.
1. Salvador Dali was interested in the ability of the paranoid mind to see and/or invent links and associations between things that are not obviously or rationally connected. He described his 'Paranoid-Critical Method'—essentially attempting to simulate clinical paranoid schizophrenia—as a 'spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the critical and systematic objectivity of the associations and interpretations of delusional phenomena.'

2. John Watson, psychologist and founder of 'Behaviourism', explains peripheralism in relation to its antonym, centralism. Centralism proposes that the root causes of our behaviour are to be found in the central nervous system, the brain and spinal cord. Through 'peripheralism' Watson suggested that peripheral events, or human functions external to the central nervous system, such as those of skeletal muscles or the sex organs, play a major role in behaviour.


4. From 'House of The Rising Sun': A traditional folk-song, authorship of these lyrics dubiously attributed to Georgia Turner and Bert Martin. I like Dylan's version best.

5. "I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally," he began, showing in his remark the weakness of many tellers of tales who seem to often unaware of what their audience would best like to hear; yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up the river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—into my thoughts. It was somehow enough,

6. 'On the Beck's Futures website the word 'innovative' crops up several times. Terms such as innovative, original, ground-breaking and cutting edge make me suspicious. These are not words an artist would ever use about himself or his work. They are PR terms, they are words used to engage a news agenda, to appeal to a desire akin to the male sexual appetite, a lust for fresh meat. The economist and social philosopher Ludwig von Mises said: 'Innovation is the whim of an elite before it becomes the need of the public.' Grayson Perry: 'It's original, but is it any good?' The Times, 22 February 2006.

7. See The Originality of The Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths.

8. An authentic last minute decision based on superstitious advice that it's bad luck to state your intentions for a publication's future too plainly in its first issue.

9. Years ago my father got electrocuted. He was unplugging an old clock for my grandmother and the elastic casing came away in his hand causing him to touch the wires. Everyone saw it happen, and for a second we all just kind of stood there looking at dad lying on the floor, wondering what to do and whether or not he was dead. I'd recently seen the movie of that Stephen King book The Lawn Mower Man, and I distinctly remember looking at dad and imagining that he'd just been uploaded into the national grid and was probably in the traffic lights outside by now.


* Luke's are in italics. Jinty's in the roman
The editorial for issue #1 paints a pretty good picture of how Jonty and I have tended to collaborate on this project. Initially we tried to write this "together". This was extremely difficult... we’d each constantly re-word whatever the other had written. It got frustrating and just seemed like it would take ages to get anywhere like that. So...

we came up with this; we each chose a number of words we thought described something about the project, and then tried to (briefly) say what we meant by it. We ended up with far too many though and could only use a few, so we argued about what was ‘in’ and what was ‘out’. But in the end, of course, it was a very useful process to go through.

Peripheral

(A Declaration) That this is—or that it aims to be—a peripheral publication for graphic design. That this occurred to us while putting this issue together [p.45]. That it could be applied to most, if not all, of the articles you see here. That it summed up nicely some of our earlier attempts to develop a declaration for this project. That we like the connection to the optional bits and pieces you attach to your computer. But that, more generally a ‘periphery’ is an outer edge, an imprecise boundary of some domain. And therefore that, as our domain is graphic design, we will be calling ourselves peripheralists... as opposed to centralists. And finally that, we are aware of the axonomorphic nature of such a quest. [14 FEB ‘06]

Print

We’ve been adamant for the duration that this needs to be a printed publication. It’s not that we ever thought it was a ‘better’ idea than publishing this stuff online—it’s probably not—but it’s what we wanted to do. If we weren’t printing it we probably wouldn’t be doing it. [07 MAR ‘06]

Manfest

The National Grid keeps returning to manifestos [p.90]. One of our early sessions was spent getting exasperated by the fundamentalist religious overtones of the New Zealand Government’s ‘Better by Design’ manifesto. We wanted to offer a counter-manifesto, inspired by the manifestos of early Modernism, like Jan Tschichold’s Die Neue Typographie, and of course The Communist Manifesto by Marx and Engels. Marx starts: ‘A spectre is haunting Europe—The spectre of communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance...’, and we wanted to start off with an equally ominous statement. Marx’s writing was a salvation narrative, his chosen people the proletariat. We wanted to have our own salvation narrative—to define ourselves in opposition to the ‘Better’ folk. A Manifesto does seem like a ridiculous idea in this day and age [p.33], but we were charmed by the romantic fervour and aggressive zeal of those early twentieth century glimpses of utopia. We thought we should fight fire with fire, evangelism with evangelism. [18 FEB ‘06]

New-Zealand

Somewhere

As in, “you have to start somewhere”. We said we were specifically interested in ‘New Zealand’ when we applied for funding. But at the time we were just saying what we needed to say. Now though, working on this from the other side of the world, I’m beginning to think it’s partly what validates the project. The ‘world’ at large probably doesn’t need this, but New Zealand could definitely do with it. And that seems like a good place to start. Having somewhere to start but to not know exactly where you’re going... it’s very Easy Rider. Although we’re less sure of ourselves than Peter Fonda and Denis Hopper were. We certainly aren’t ready to throw our watches away. We’re more “One foot on the platform, the other foot on the train” [1]. But I like that. It’s negotiating the coming/the going, the lights on/the lights off [p.32], that makes it interesting and less like a job. [01 JAN ‘06]

Negotiation

Kitchen Stories was ‘one of my top ten’ films last year. By Norwegian filmmaker Bent Hamer, it is a charming, gentle critique of innovation, social engineering, and positivism. It counters these scientific narratives with a story of the intractableness of human character, personal interaction, and negotiating actual situations. In the film, the Swedish Home Research Institute (in the 1950s) is trying to design the perfect kitchen, through the use of ‘neutral observation’, and probably things like user-testing, perceived-affordance, and problem solving. The crux of the film is the instruction from the HRI hierarchy that “Under no circumstances can the observer interact with the ‘subject’ of their observation.” [p.26].

Research

[15 JAN ‘06]

Resonance

Aaron [p.33] wrote something last year about ‘aesthetic resonance’: it’s a nice idea. I tend to like it when people conflate discussions about sight and sound. There’s a lot of ‘music’ in this first issue, which I know worries you, but it seems natural to me. A lot of interesting graphic design has been done in or around the music industry, and I think it’s why many of us got into it in the first place. I think it would be really interesting if graphic design could look at itself in relation to music, rather than architecture or industrial design.

Then we wouldn’t have to talk about problem solving, and we could talk about resonance instead. [21 JAN ‘06]

Garage

Of course purists hate seeing old cars ‘chopped’ and modified. To many a hot rod is a mongrel, a mutated monster [p.33], a ‘bustard’ in the sense that its genealogy is hybrid and impure. But the interesting thing about a real hot rod is that it’s never really finished. It exists in a continual state of flux, or modification. We’d like to be able to side-step the puritanical tendencies of a lot of design writing and allow this project more of an anecdotal, casual-obsessive space to evolve... a lot like the suburban garage [p.38]. [02 MAR ‘06]
Better

Are things really ‘Better by Design’? [p.96] Sure, sometimes they are, but I like ‘Better by Accident’ too. The New Zealand Design Taskforce report cover has the title; Success by Design Chance (with the word chance crossed out like that). I like the idea of ‘Success by Chance’ better. And ‘Design by Chance’. Sometimes things are ‘Worse by Design’. But often things are better because of all sorts of unpredictable exchanges, clever observations, lucky coincidences, nepotistic relationships, historical resonances, social negotiations, and persuasive performances. New Zealand’s ‘Better by Design’ moment is a study in myth making. These myths are absolutely necessary for the development and promotion of a culture, but they should not be mistaken for being really ‘real’. They must be critiqued and questioned by the rest of us on the periphery, especially when the myths aren’t very convincing or useful.

[12 DEC 05]

Borrowing

#1 might be a bit heavy on the design found-object, a bit artefact-y. But I guess it reflects a bias towards the practice of graphic design being about documenting culture rather than creating culture. Artefacts are only interesting in as much as they index the rest of the world. I feel very suspicious when people talk about ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’ in design. Apart from the fact that they are problematic terms in an intertextual world (and see Rosalind Krauss’), I like that I haven’t really had to design anything here. Just borrow. But also because of having to get permission to reproduce other peoples’ work we have opened up new connections in The Grid.

[06 MAR 06]

Intentions

What does #1 index? Sometimes it’s a kind of mystery, that kind of stuff.

[13 MAR 06]

Planning

History

The National Grid came up as a title for something years ago. I can’t remember why. I just thought it sounded good, and you can apply whatever you like to it really. Pretty quickly it became an idea for a cheap lo-fi graphic design fanzine that I talked to various people about, but it wasn’t until we had that caffeine-fueled conversation in Sumner about a year ago now that it actually began to happen. You weren’t immediately sold on the name, and so I never mentioned this at the time, but Aaron and I had a band room right next door to a guy who had a small recording studio that he called ‘The National Grid’. It bugged me that he’d beaten us to it but I thought it didn’t matter as we’re in different domains, and no one had really heard of the studio anyway. Then late last year The Bats released that album At The National Grid.

[02 MAR 06]

Grid

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Anyway I ended up living in Brooklyn (peripheral) and obviously I never wrote it.

[02 MAR 06]

Pseudonym

Some of my personal favourites; Bo Diddley, John Wayne, Le Corbusier, Poitin Ivy, Rockets Redglare, Segue Lugosi, [p.8], Tristan Tzara, and Winona Ryder. Of course taking on a fictitious identity and not revealing your real name can cause some to doubt your authenticity—a publication’s integrity—but we agreed that it... well, it’s sort of helped some people who don’t normally do what they’re doing here to do it. Many of us are ‘Aka-ing’ here in a sense—moonlighting—we’ve all got day jobs.

[10 JAN 06]

Commonplace

I have a folder on my desktop called ‘common places’. It’s where I put a whole lot of docs to record random things I’m thinking about. The idea of Commonplaces, dates back to the Classical era. They were originally used as a support for rhetorical arguments. As they developed, Commonplace Books became, in a way, the precursors to modern encyclopedias and dictionaries. But they were also sometimes more personal like diaries—were they were people recorded, for recall, the ‘places’ that they would refer back to for their knowledge, influences, arguments. I first thought this editorial would be an abstract of our commonplace books, but really the whole National Grid is our commonplace.

[28 FEB 06]

Loose-ends

This whole endeavour really, is the result of us being at a bit of a loose-end. Neither of us were very good at being real graphic designers, I mean we could ‘design’ ok, but all that other stuff; time, money, people skills? Why we both ended up in education I guess. But we’re not entirely happy there either, and we’ve often joked around about our best students being unemployed. After dinner with Peter and Stuart I Googled them and I found that interview with Stuart where he mentions something about finding an escape route out of design, whereas I think for this project has been more about finding a way back in.

[22 FEB 06]
In the editorial to the first issue of *The National Grid* I mentioned that I thought “...it’d be really interesting if graphic design could look at itself in relation to music, rather than architecture or industrial design. Then we wouldn’t have to talk about problem solving, and we could talk about resonance instead”.

The editorial was written after the material had come in from the various contributors, and this ‘observation’ was based on the three texts that were obviously charting some area or relationship between music and design.1 And my comment points to that desire to locate a “more personally resonant frame of reference” (introduction to this chapter).

One of the distant memories dug up by the incidental autobiographical quality of my research has been that I did actually come to design from music, more or less. As a teenager, it was record covers and posters for my favourite bands that eventually led me into finding out about Graphic Design.

In chapter 1, Disenchantment, I have mentioned that music had become a major distraction for me—that I was sort of more interested in music than design. So of course one of the exciting (engaging) opportunities offered by this project is the possibility to begin to look at that—my interests in music and performance—through the framework of graphic design (and vice versa).

Interviewing Dylan Herkes for issue #1 was quite difficult. I’d never interviewed anyone before, and I also had some flawed idea that it should be more of a ‘conversation’ than an interview. Regardless, the process of communicating with Dylan was immensely satisfying.

On our website2 I said this...

Any “graphic design” Dylan engages in—not that he ever calls it that—is usually peripheral, a by-product of his interests in music and film. The source, perhaps, of its charm, wit, and honesty.

Of course looking at Dylan’s ‘hybrid practice’ and comparing it to my own, was quite educational (it was also a relief to be able to look at someone else for a change!). My enjoyment of this process made me want to do it again... to talk with somebody else operating in this murky area between sight and sound.

Recently I have approached Bruce Russell—guitarist of infamous New Zealand noise band The Dead C—for an interview for issue #2. Bruce has run his own record label for a number of years now and has designed many of the covers for the recordings he has released. As with Dylan, his practice as a musician is documented, but his work as a designer has never been discussed. So again I’ll be looking for that ‘overlap’; the hybrid practice, the happy medium, the bleeding of one sort of practice into another...

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2. [http://www.thenationalgrid.co.nz/mysterious_interview.html](http://www.thenationalgrid.co.nz/mysterious_interview.html)
Learning from distraction [part 2]

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Initially I thought I'd edit out all the talk about 'gear'—the guitars and amplifiers and stuff. But in the end they were the parts I liked best... in an oblique way I felt like that part of the conversation said more about Dylan's image making than when I would try to reign him in to talk about the 'design' more specifically.

I was living in New York when I interviewed Dylan, but since I've come back I've seen quite a bit of him. We communicate often and are currently planning to play some music, perhaps tour together later this year.

So Dylan fits nicely into the 'other people' part of this as well.
ROCK AND ROLL

The recently released White Stripes’ DVD Under Blackpool Lights captures and highlights a fundamental aspect of the dynamic duo’s raison d’etre. Nostalgia. If not a yearning for the past, certainly a love of it underlies and motivates the structure, sound, and image that has been Jack and Meg White’s project since the mid 1990s. Shot entirely on Super 8, the format for documentation is in keeping with their commitment to record their last album using only equipment manufactured before 1963. The White Stripes are, of course, not alone in turning their backs on not-so-recent developments in audio and visual technology. The ‘rock-and-roll revival’ of the past few years has given birth to a growing market for vintage guitars, valve amps, and analogue sound-effects (not to mention tight jeans, Chuck Taylors, Ramones t-shirts, blazers etc). To some extent a reaction to the precise and clean aesthetic of the digital late 90s, this new-old attitude is currently rearing its head in various forms of creative output. But how creative can looking back be? Has the past got anything new to offer? Have The Datsuns found something we missed the first time around?

NOSTALGIA IS A DIRTY WORD

It’s use, in critical discourse on design, is generally in the negative. It implies a lack of originality or innovation—the appropriation of pre-existing forms and ideas—and worse, a kind of schmaltzy sentimental and emotional attachment to the past. As a self-diagnosed nostalgic, I’m interested in how processes, forms and ideas dredged up from the past motivate practitioners and attract audiences, but also—and perhaps more importantly—how nostalgic sources might potentially be transformed to offer less derivative and more exploratory outcomes.

THE USE AND ABUSE OF HISTORY

The tendency for designers to recycle styles from the past has been the subject of heated criticism since the fall of Modernism in the late 1970s. Prompted by architects who had come to be labelled ‘Post Modern’, graphic designers began to explore historical sampling in the early eighties. Jon Savage, writing for The Face magazine in 1983, effectively labelled the decade ‘The Age of Plunder’. Citing album covers by Peter Saville and Barney Bubbles, Savage exposed the appropriation at work and lamented the lack of “any real sense of history”. Savage was not alone. The fiercest charge came from literary critic Fredric Jameson who attacked Postmodernism for its regressive nostalgia and trivialising irony.

Other young British graphic designers such as Malcolm Garret and Neville Brody made sport of their influences, often targeting early Modernist form while irreverently ignoring its intentions. In 1990 Malcolm Garret coined the term ‘Retrievalism’ to describe his method—claiming that “All art is theft”—while Tibor Kalman publicly pronounced such work to be ‘Jive Modernism’, blaming graphic designers’ lack of historical knowledge for the fact style had become a detachable attribute.

On a recent visit to a design school in Melbourne I had a conversation with a 19 year old student who was wearing a brand spanking new Joy Division t-shirt, originally designed by Peter Saville in the early eighties. Being an old fan—of both band and designer—I tried to spark up a conversation, at which point the wearer admitted to not really knowing anything about either. Style certainly had become a detachable attribute. Sensing this kind of empty nostalgia bugged me, yet I was forced to remember that Saville himself had been accused of this exact same thing twenty years before.
The idea this kind of superficial recycling of style—of form without content—can be anything but regressive, is hard to get your head around. Of course I want to argue that Saville’s appropriations were inherently better through some sense of his ‘knowing-what-he-was-doing’, but, as anyone aware of Saville’s practice will know, this might not necessarily be the case. When discussing his early career Saville himself admits to not having read much and, consequently, recycling form for its face value—its ‘feel’—rather than a deep understanding of what it meant the first time around.

More recently however, Saville, Garret, and Brody have all been written into the growing history of graphic design as some of their era’s most innovative practitioners. So what happened here? Finding ourselves now in the midst of another revivalist era, taking a look at how we made it out of the eighties might be a good idea.

DESCENDANT MUTATIONS

One of the things I admire about Peter Saville is his refreshingly honest admission to an interest in form, image, and fashion. It seems quite bizarre to me that it still sounds so brave for a designer to admit to an interest in the surface of things. One of my favourite texts on design from the nineties is by Anne Burdick who, on the verge of a moment of truth, reveals that “designers crave perpetual stylistic (r)evolution”.1

Motivated by style’s propensity to sleep around, Burdick’s piece ‘Neomania: Feeding the Monster’, tackles the same fundamental concern as Jive Modernism, but in a way that is inherently more aware of the role graphic design plays as “participant and product” in popular culture. She points out that as the pace of popular culture accelerates, our maniacal search for the constantly “new” has inevitably lead to a point where “style has begun to feed on itself”. More realistic and, interestingly, less nostalgic than the arguments presented by many of her predecessors (who essentially yearn for a Modernist past), Burdick’s ideas offer a way forward—a way out of the trappings of utopian notions of originality and innovation.

Her notion of “descendant mutations”, in which form essentially floats freely and is only tied down to meaning by its application to a context, is helpful in understanding that style (defined for her purposes as the visual language of a culture, and of a time) is organic in the sense that it, like us, is subject to evolution. In a more recent text2 by Jan Michl, he puts forward a case for ‘design’ to be more appropriately referred to as ‘redesign’, in that no design is ever entirely new, that it is, at best, a new combination of solutions that have already existed.

Anyone working in any field of creative endeavour would hopefully claim to acknowledge the importance of influence. Tibor Kalman, his own practice often involving the appropriation of vernacular forms, stresses the importance for designers to “transform” borrowed ideas into “good design”.3 It’s not mentioned explicitly, but you can’t help but be aware of the tone—good design is new design. In regard to my own line of inquiry this idea of transformation is obviously intriguing—actually it’s precisely what I’m looking for—but all Kalman has to offer in this respect is the suggestion that designers must try their best to ‘re-contextualise’ and not ‘de-contextualise’ historical references.

I guess I don’t really subscribe to the idea that anything can ever be completely without context, and so I’m forced to consider the Joy Division t-shirt again. I recall something else Peter Saville said. “My generation can only see things in the context of other things that have already happened.

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So programmed are we by postmodern sensibility—or maybe just the end of belief—that we understand everything referentially... Everything is like something else: ‘It’s like Elvis, on speed. It’s kind of medieval, in space.’ Everything is contextualised and defined retrospectively.”

NOSTALGIA IS THE PAST IMAGINED

Idealised and romanticised via memory and desire, nostalgia is selective. Memory and desire have a tendency to distort and reorganise their contents and subjects. On July 19th 1954 Sun Records released Elvis Presley’s first single That’s all right (mama), originally written and performed by Arthur ‘Big Boy’ Crudup. The B-side to the disc contained a version of Bill Monroe’s Blue moon of Kentucky. Neither song was originally written or performed by Presley, but both were somehow transformed—rendered new. So much so, that the single was an overnight success, and the rest is history. But what I really like about this 7” piece of plastic is that it reveals—literally and poetically—the artist’s strategy for transformation. One side taken from a formulaic blues structure, and the other from an equally predictable country tune, within this artefact each previously distinct genre has become fused into the other—as if the vinyl pressing went haywire and spat out some kind of hybrid monster.

Hybridity was claimed, by Charles Jencks in the late seventies, as a fundamental aspect within the aesthetics postmodernism. Jan Michl’s preference for the term ‘redesign’ can be seen to stem from this, illustrating the evolutionary nature of language and ideas, while describing perfectly the processes employed by the young Elvis Presley, or Peter Saville. The hybridisation of previously disparate forms and/or processes can potentially yield rich and fertile ground for the nostalgic practitioner to step beyond the simple regurgitation of the past.

A POINT OF DEPARTURE

Nostalgia is often aligned with the politics of conservatism, and there’s certainly something healthy about each generation rejecting the one that came before it. The infamous Dadaist, Richard Huelsenbeck, claimed that all art begins with critique and doubt, and it is a commonly held belief that to some extent longing is what makes art possible. However, when a younger generation rejects the dominant contemporary culture of their forbears, they will often turn (more or less consciously) to the past in order to create their own future.

“The question of ancestry in culture is spurious”, claims Greil Marcus in Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century. “Every new manifestation in culture rewrites the past, changes old maudits into new heroes, old heroes into those who should have never been born.” Thus Peter Saville. Once maudit, now hero—his career celebrated recently by way of a retrospective at the Design Museum in London. In a publication released alongside the exhibition Saville recalls seeing Jan Tschichold’s work for the first time. “I was astonished it was all so old—design had been to all these places and had seemingly forgotten or never embraced them.”

Might a return to the past herald a new point of departure from it? A new trajectory—a side street that was missed last time you passed by? It is my contention that nostalgia, in this sense, can be a source of revolution—the past still a site for exploration and unexpected outcomes.

HATCH SHOW PRINT

Designing posters for local bands over the last few years, I had begun to reference—in fact steal—formal elements and images from the book Hatch Show Print: The History of a Great American Poster Shop. Initially I simply enjoyed exploring a set of formal devices I was unfamiliar with. Of course, as I began to get the style down, I began to wonder where it might go from here? Would I simply regurgitate the same formulas over and over again, or could I somehow manipulate the formula, turn it in on itself, and head off in a new direction. It seemed to make sense that before


5. ibid.
I 'went' anywhere, I should visit the source of my own nostalgic borrowings.

Having attempted various ways to mimic the aesthetics of letterpress and wood type with my Mac, a photocopier, and a bottle of turps, I was recently fortunate enough to spend a week working as an intern at Hatch Show Print in Nashville, Tennessee. Expecting to arrive in downtown Nashville and be making coffee or running errands for elderly men in dusty labcoats covered in ink, I was shocked—pleasantly surprised—to find the place alive and kicking. Saved from near ruin in the early nineties, the revival of Hatch Show Print has been lead by the slightly eccentric, while delightfully down to earth, southern gentleman (not a Republican!), Jim Sherraden. With the help of the Gill family girls, a handful of full-time staff, and a seemingly endless supply of willing volunteers, Hatch turns out about six hundred jobs a year for clients new and old. Everything is as it was—type set and printed by hand. Reprints—literally, from the original woodblocks—of posters produced by the shop for the likes of Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, and Elvis Presley, keep the place busy with curious visitors keen to snap up an authentic piece of country music memorabilia.

Nostalgia has obviously played a key role in the survival and revival of Hatch Show Print. Rarity, the fact that you can’t really get posters like this any more, is largely what attracts new clients and customers. While this also explains, to some extent, the interest practitioners have in being at Hatch, the predominant motivating factor I picked up on was ‘authenticity’. An often misplaced aspect of nostalgia is the sense that a loss of authenticity has occurred over time due to the march of technological progress. Of course there’s nothing inherently more authentic about working with blocks of wood or with a computer. Any use of the term ‘authentic’ begs the question, “as opposed to what?” It’s relative. The sense of authenticity that Hatch locates is very similar to what William Morris and John Ruskin were concerned with one hundred years ago now—the distance of the maker from the made.

As an intern at Hatch one should expect to layout, proof, and print all their own work. In the space of a week I produced three posters (two for clients and one for myself). Working in an atmosphere that felt a million miles away from a commercial design studio, I couldn’t help but begin to think about how a return to ‘out-dated’ processes and their reciprocal formal languages, might herald new points of departure for a nostalgic practitioner. Determined to make something ‘more’ out of my romantic tendency to want to live in the past, my continuing practice will attempt to transform the familiar and locate new trajectories from within nostalgic impulses.

Long before being a conscious effort of any sort, this text is an early example of my trying to combine talking about design with my interests in music.

Again, this was also published in Prodesign (#76, April/May 2005). I’d really struggled with this piece, and I was mildly devastated when the issue came out because I knew the audience of the publication would really appreciate my effort. This was the last text I wrote for Prodesign, and the beginning of my real commitment to making The National Grid happen.

My trip to Hatch Show Print in Nashville, Tennessee, was also part of my pilgrimage to Memphis.
WITH OUR REverb
WE WILL RAISE THE DEAD

LUKE WOOD'S
GRAND SALOON

all electric
HILLBILLY HELLFIRE

with
HUNDREDWEIGHT
and
WUNDERBAR

MONEY

SATURDAY 16th APRIL

GET IN FREE

ONE NIGHT ONLY

REVERBERATION
Graphic Design Needs a Distortion Pedal
Aaron Beehre

The best thing about Star Wars is Han Solo. There's no question about it, bar the Millennium Falcon, that large bogan beast of a ship that feels more at home in suburbia than the Starship Enterprise ever could. The quality that makes a character like Han and his bogan ride so engaging, is the same quality that has hi-fi geeks and audio nerds salivating when discussing valve amplification and recordings on vinyl—'noise'. Noise is the enigmatic quality that is prevalent in all systems (like it or not). For Star Wars, Han Solo provides noise within the narrative through his unpredictability, roguish attributes and vulnerability. These qualities create a buzzing dissonance within the plot, injecting a 'right kind of wrongness' to the merely average storyline. The same noise exists in the process of valve amplification, where a sound or signal is fed through a valve, transforming the sound via distortion. This process produces two modes of harmonic distortion that react together to fatten a tone by providing additional layers and depth to the signal. The distortion—the noise—equates to a level of physicality and 'reality', an organic interface with which our senses can absorb and decipher signals in-through. That's just the way it exists. We exist within a physical space that is forever noisy. Which is why we love noise. We're drawn to it. It's the drama of it all, because perfection is boring, and entropy is dynamic.

So Han Solo and the Millennium Falcon work as noise elements, creating a dissonance necessary for engagement. That dissonance also creates layers, and a level of distance within the process, from which multiple interpretations can be made. It's the flattening of a tone through valve amplification, and the physicality and vulnerability of a vinyl pressing. Given that the study of information theory has noise as intrinsic to any communication system, the elimination of noise seems futile. This is the way of vinyl pressing and valve amplification is successful, as they credit the dynamic role entropy and noise play within their given system. The process utilises the push/pull nature of a noise to signal dialogue to create a higher level of engagement. Then there is Return of The Jedi and the fiasco that is Star Wars 1–3. George Lucas needs a Tube Screamer. The Tube Screamer is one of those great pedals that retains the original timbre of a signal and adds texture through a soft clipping process. Strictly speaking, the Tube Screamer is an overdrive pedal rather than a distortion pedal, but its ability to add sustain without destroying dynamics is a characteristic George should be made aware of.

A distortion pedal creates depth and texture giving sound power and lustre, removing it from the lame arse, skinny, middle class, white kid on the other end of the guitar. Such 'depth'—harmonic layering, dissonance and texture—has its place in graphic design. It's the necessary departure for reflection and critique, creating space for further discovery and revelation. This distance encourages experimentation and evolution, removing graphic design from the same arse, skinny, middle class focus group at the other end of a brief. It's like that project that you spent way too much time on, got way to involved with and it now ruins your life to the point where you can no longer critique your work because you are your work. I'm not saying distortion, or noise, can save you from this plight as it seems we love the drama too much to be saved. But through crediting and utilizing noise within the design process the designer is able to create a level of distance from the work, which operates as a critique towards the work as well allowing for new directions through the random/non-linear qualities that noise and entropy can produce.

The ability graphic design has to encompass a number of production techniques allows the designer to plunder the borders of disciplines. This process allows craft and production to become a form of entropy—noise—within the design process. The entropy creates a distortion of ideas that, in turn, project departure points within the parameters of the project. So designers gain much from immersion in production techniques, not only to satisfy their control fetish but also to create a non-linear approach to problem solving through engaging with a noise dialogue. This push/pull of design's predetermined outcome or signal, and a recognition of the role noise can (and does) play in communicating that signal, creates a heightened level of engagement with the work for both audience and designer.
As a follow up to my interview with Dylan in the first issue I will be interviewing Bruce Russell (see page 149) for #2. I’ve been to visit Bruce recently and picked up this collection of work to look through, and also listen to, before beginning the interview. I was surprised to discover Bruce has also done a lot of writing over the years, and he gave me a couple of small publications he’d done. Of course I’m really interested in this—in how ‘writing’ manifests itself within or around his practice as a musician and as a designer. As a bit of an old Marxist, Bruce is particularly interested in the intersection of theory and practice—of thinking and doing, of text and action. He also has a good sense of humour, and I like his writing. So what I’m getting at here is the potential this project has to open me up to a network of new people whose practices I admire and respect, and who I feel I can learn from. Along with the interview we will be reproducing some of Bruce’s existing texts in #2.
Practical Materialism: Lesson Two

Thinking My Head to the Sky

for Marco Fusinato

Karl Marx had several very good ideas, all of which almost without exception have been willfully misunderstood and misappropriated since his death. His basic conception of a true materialist philosophy is one of these. Leaving aside the obfuscations of Engels (an untrustworthy guide to philosophy at the best of times) as well as those of his even less worthy successors, and one is left with a remarkably simple conception. Practical materialism, as we may denote this ‘purely Marxian’ idea \(^1\), conceives of an interaction between a fundamental material reality (qua Object) and sentient human actors possessing free will (qua Subject). The peculiar genius of Marx lay in positing the locus of this interaction outside any imaginary philosophical construct or field of theoretical endeavour, instead he posited the ground of interaction as being work. In this way the subjective ‘thesis’ acts upon the objective ‘antithesis’ to produce an integrated ‘synthesis’ which represents a higher stage in the Hegelian dialectical triad. This organic union of theory and practice, posited on a ground of everyday life, he termed praxis.

An illuminating example of this is the Alexander Technique. Like all great ideas, the core of the Technique is very simple - that the Mind inhabits the Body and the two are interdependent in such a way that one can work on the Body with the Mind, and on the Mind with the Body. Simple stuff perhaps, but this wholistic insight cuts against all traditional Western philosophical thought from Descartes onwards. What is more, it is not primarily a philosophical insight, but a
"All that has dark sounds has duende."


As the Spanish Instrument par excellence, the guitar comes pre-loaded with a burden of extra-musical cultural significance. When we play the guitar, we are always playing with a caravan of images which trail us like ghosts across a television screen. Jimi Hendrix; Robert Johnson; and a crowd of anonymous Spanish gypsies, swarming like penitents on the road to Santiago.

The spirit of the guitar is the duende, neither angel nor muse, but animating spirit, equally malevolent and indifferent, demanding nothing but blood on the strings.

"Spain is always moved by the duende... being a nation open to death."

Lorca, p. 136.

For me as an artist, sound is the central activity - which in my case is the attempt to say something from the self itself. Opening the self to allow this expression to emerge is a problematic exercise. The best results come from a loss of conscious control over this process, an opening to 'something other'.

In the Spanish model, this is the duende speaking. Being an evil genius, the art inspired by the duende is never simple; clear; or light-filled. It is dark; ambiguous; and tinged with horror - the horror of our contingent existence.
Some Notes Towards a New Manifesto for a Peripheral Practice in Graphic Design (or... God is in the Footnotes)

When you first asked me to do this I was quite keen. Now though—as usual—I’ve left it until the last minute and I’m going to have to stay up late tonight and just get it done. It’s not that I haven’t tried. There have been a couple of false starts—I’d started to answer your questions but would always veer off on a bit of tangent. I have to admit I’m currently suffering from some strange affliction where whenever I try to say anything the exact opposite also occurs—in my head—to be true. Anyway, reading back over those false starts just now I realise that the diversions or roadblocks I’d come up against were, at least obliquely, related to my trying to uncover your “hidden agenda”. So I’ve decided that I won’t try to answer your questions too specifically this time, and that I’ll just head out with my packed lunch and take any vaguely interesting looking side roads that I come across. I’m not sure how long you want this to be, but I was wondering if, rather than edit it down (or add more to it), you could just ask Alan to make the type smaller (or bigger) so that it fits the space I’ve been allocated?

Ok so the thing is, whenever I try to write something about these things—the publications I’ve sent to you—I catch myself drifting off, and I thought this might be an appropriate place or idea with which to begin this last-chance attempt. The truth is—and I’m being very honest here—they don’t really hold my attention anymore. The objects I mean. It’s a funny thing that happens—you spend an amount of time or energy (it’s the energy) on producing these things that, at the time, are simply THE MOST IMPORTANT THING. It’s ridiculous. Laughable, in hindsight. I’ve actually had relationships break down because of it. Press-passing the Christopher Williams publication almost killed me. The stress I mean—to get it right. And then, of course, it’s never ‘right’ is it.

It’s a funny thing this ALL then NOTHING. It’s like meeting an ex on the street and really not caring whether they’ve met somebody else or not. I’ve managed to slide through most of my life as a designer without ever really needing to put together a portfolio. Perhaps this is partly why I don’t have a very good relationship with the artefacts of my practice? I’ve had the same problem whenever I’ve tried to record with any of the bands I’ve played in too though. There’s a lot of time and effort (it’s the effort) put into getting it sounding right, and then there’s the fact that you never listen to them once they’re done anyway. I remember hearing a story once about Morrisey listening to his own music all the time and thinking how horribly narcissistic that was, while deep down inside I imagined what it would be like to be able to actually enjoy what you’ve made.

I’m sounding a bit dramatic perhaps, but I’m trying to get to telling you that I don’t really want to talk about the ‘work’ as such. That the artefacts themselves never interest me much once they’re done... but that there are other things.

1. Jonty Valentine. Although we both studied design at Canterbury University, I first met Jonty in 1997. I moved to Hamilton to take up an inhouse design position that Jonty had just vacated at The Waikato Museum of Art and History. He went to teach at the Media Arts course there, and Hamilton being Hamilton we obviously ended up hanging out a bit. Right now we’re co-editing issue #2 of a new graphic design fanzine thing we’re trying to get ‘set up’. It’s called ‘The National Grid’, and obviously that title seems relevant here.

2. Alan Deare. I think I first met Alan at the Waikato Polytech? He’d just graduated and probably it would have been Jonty who introduced me to him. He’d been a student of Jonty’s. Later on I ended up leaving the museum to teach at the same Media Arts course, although I only lasted one semester because I found teaching really difficult. I’ve bumped into him now and then, even as far south as Christchurch. Recently he designed another Objectspace catalogue which my girlfriend had written something for (just to further the point about how small and inter-related our community really is).

3. Christopher Williams. I only met Christopher Williams once. It was at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth with Greg Burke. Christopher is American, and had come to NZ from California (I think?) to put up his show at the Govett-Brewster. We had a day long meeting one weekend about the catalogue, and he gave me a publication he’d done previously with some gallery in Europe. Basically he was keen to copy that one which, if I remember correctly, was based on some other publication which had some sort of historical resonance for him. We got on well, and we communicated mostly via fax once he’d gone back to the States. I didn’t ever hear from him again after the publication was done.
One of the things I always struggle with whenever I try to write anything is the feeling that someone else, somewhere else has said it better before. I'm trying to think about what I do like about graphic design, and I keep coming back to Stuart's idea that "it isn't an A PRIORI discipline, but a GHOST". He's talking about graphic design requiring some sort of external reason for being, but I like the implication that it is, as Max used to say, "a slippery customer". That it is a sort of in-between discipline, not a real 'practice' at all, but a monstrous, hybrid THING, or nothing in particular. Stuart says it better, "...both a grey area and a meeting point—a contradiction in terms—or a node made visible only by plotting it through the lines of connections." And you're interested in those connections I think? In bringing them to light, I think you said? Is that how you want to describe graphic design?

I had dinner around at Bruce's last night and he was showing me through the CD and record covers he'd either done or been involved in. It was a great conversation partly because Bruce is a good story teller, but mostly because the covers themselves were all so highly charged with narrative potential anyway. Each one was a signpost to multiple others—within Bruce's label and outside of it. That's your intertextuality I guess. Or Barthes' tissue of quotations sort of. But what I started thinking about was the connections or interactions you were going after with this show, and how what really mattered was just BEING THERE with Bruce, listening. What I mean is that I was sort of more interested in the stories behind the things than in the things themselves. I liked the idea that this discography was itself a kind of rhizomatic autobiography.

I'm kind of getting around to your question about how we evaluate our work. The fact that my own sense of value in graphic design has shifted somewhat in the last ten years. Hamish will be horrified if he reads this but I'm going to go ahead and say it anyway: I don't care about good design. But that's not quite right? It's more that my idea of what is 'good' has moved, like I've adjusted the sights on my rifle. Maybe I should say; I don't care about good (elegant?) typography? I generally just set everything in Times New Roman these days. But that's not it either? I guess partly this is about my not thinking that graphic design is very hard (and the complete opposite also occurs to be true), and so more accurately perhaps, I could just say that these days I care more about

4. Stuart Bailey. I first met Stuart in New York earlier this year at a dinner which Lisa had organised. I ended up sitting at the opposite corner of the table though so we didn't really talk that night. Anyway I bumped into him again about month later at Parsons School of Design, by which point Lisa had given him a copy of The National Grid. I was nervous (embarrassed?) because we'd so obviously based that publication on Dot Dot Dot, which he is co-editor and designer of. Anyway he seemed to like it—name at least—and I found him really good to talk to about that project. I saw him a couple more times before I left, and I've been bugging him with ideas about my research/writing ever since. The quote here—in the body text—is from 'Dear X' which is a sort-of-editorial for Dot Dot Dot #8. This text really helped me to believe in graphic design again. The secondary 'or' subtitle for this text, God Is In The Footnotes, is actually Stuart's too. I took it from the back cover of DDD #7.

5. Max Hallstone. I first met Max as a first year student at Canterbury University when I went to explain to him that I really wanted to major in graphic design. I thought I hadn't done very well in that first year, but we'd had somebody else taking us and so I wanted to explain to Max that I would put in a lot more effort next year. Thankfully Max let me into the continuing studio course in 'Typo-graphic Design', as he called it. Unfortunately I think I let him down. He was very much a Formalist and I wasn't really engaged by that. As a result I wasn't a great student. In hindsight I can appreciate him more though. Max died in a car accident in Rhode Island in early 1997, the year I graduated.

6. Bruce Russell. I first met Bruce in a cafe he owned and ran in Lyttelton about two years ago. I'd get coffee there on my way to school each morning, and we'd started to talk about music. From memory I think he'd often have some interesting records playing in the cafe, especially early in the morning when there weren't many people there. It took me a while to click that he was the guitarist in The Dead C. Anyway eventually I ended up borrowing some records off him and he talked as much about the covers as he did about the music. Of course I then realised that he'd actually designed a lot of his own covers. Bruce ran a 'free noise' record label called Corpus Hermeticum up until very recently, and that's what I was there talking to him about this time. There's something about Bruce's approach to things rather than the things themselves that interests me.

7. Hamish Meikle. Hamish is certainly one of the most important people in this list, although we don't really talk anymore and I don't think he likes the way my practice has gone lately. Hamish was the first graphic designer I ever met, and I sort of worked for him—more 'work experience' than actual employment—when I was about 15. Hamish introduced me to the world of graphic design and also said that I'd have to study under Max at Canterbury University if I wanted to be any good. Years later it was Hamish who invited me back to Canterbury to fill in while he was on study leave (he'd taken over after Max was killed in that car crash). Hamish never came back, and while I never planned to stay, here I still am three years later. Hamish moved to Auckland and I haven't really heard from him since.
what the work points me at, or leads me into.

I’ll see if I can explain. David’s8 in town this week, and we’re going to be talking about his next newspaper. This will be the fourth one I’ve done with him (the previous three I’ve asked him to send you). I know it sounds a bit like I’m jumping around all over the place, but what I’m really doing is floating somewhere between the artefacts and the people involved. And David I think is the best example. We have a relationship that’s evolved more or less intuitively out of the work we’ve done together over the last eight years, and whenever I look at those publications that’s what seems important to me now, because that’s the real payoff. I remember you asking me that about something else last year— “what’s the payoff?” And I’m not talking about collaboration. I’m talking about meeting David for a breakfast, getting drunk with Bruce, or staying on the floor in your lounge when I come to Auckland. The payoff for me is in those peripheral interactions. Which comes back to that idea about graphic design being something that happens in-between the important things—the things that are really real.

I could try to be more academic I guess and talk about ‘communities of practice’. But that’s a good example of a case where the words don’t sound like what they describe. By which I mean that it’s a very analytical way to talk about something that’s essentially intuitive. Interestingly I think I first came across it—that terminology I mean—in something Lisa9 had written. I asked her about it as I’d sort of realised that I was interested in that idea, if not the language it was packaged in. She explained to me that there was actually a formal interpretation of the term, that I’d been using it a bit loosely, and that the relationships it described weren’t necessarily these intuitive ones I was talking about. She pointed out that participants needed to identify themselves within a ‘known’ community, and that the literature referred to individuals working within teams within larger corporations. Which is obviously not what I’m getting at here. But there is a connection, or an overlapping—a venn diagram perhaps? Lisa said (and it just seems best to use her words here)...

“They talk about Legitimate Peripheral Participation as being invaluable to situated learning. By talking about communities of practice, where there are people who are newcomers—apprentices of sorts—and old timers—mentors—and that our participation within the communities we inhabit is always under negotiation. Lave and Wenger discuss a centripetal notion of participation—that proposes that understanding and experience are in constant interaction. We (Robyn & I) were preparing a paper for a Practice-based Research conference and yet it soon become evident that the inter-related activities of talking, listening and writing were in themselves a kind of practice—one that dissolves the dichotomy between research about practice from research through practising.”

And there’s my breakfast with David in Wellington last week.

The other thing Lisa talks about, that seems to me to be triangularly related to her comment above, to your hidden agenda, and whatever it is I’m trying to say here, is the importance of ‘noticing’. She’s never said it specifically that I can remember, but the implication is always there—good designers are good at noticing. And the link here, the common thread, is a shared interest in the

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8. David Clegg. I first met David in Hamilton in the late 1990s. He was having a show at the gallery there and I designed the catalogue—a broadsheet newspaper which was exhibited as a part of the installation. I really enjoyed working with David. It was a more collaborative process than I was used to, and the outcome was surprisingly... unexpected. Apart from this the young designer in me was intrigued by the idea that the publication would be a ‘part’ of the show—the implication that the publication could be the artwork and vice-versa was new to me. I think it was probably around this time that I began to develop an interest in conceptual art. A first step towards my questioning the value of the artefact probably. Any way, David and I have done two more newspapers and a couple of websites since then. We’ve just started work on a fourth newspaper this week.

9. Lisa Grocott. I first met Lisa in Melbourne when I went there to begin my research towards a Masters in Design under her supervision. I’d heard a lot about her as I’d sort of unwittingly followed her around New Zealand, initially studying and then working at the same places, but always a year or two after she’d left. I even dated one of her ex-students in Hamilton. It should have been obvious that I’d eventually catch up with her, and that something strange would happen when I did. Lisa’s interests in the speculative and poetic nature of practice-led research have been an influential factor in my deciding that I might still like graphic design. This quote here is from an email she sent me in relation to my thesis outline. She certainly didn’t mean for it to be published so I hope my including it here is going to be ok with her?
peripheral—in those interactions, your “compelling moments”, which are actually on the horizon of the daily grind. Yoko\(^{10}\) pointed out to me that the idea of focusing on the periphery is actually an oxymoron. And she’s obviously quite right. So the problem is sort of ‘noticing without trying’. Which actually sounds like a good way of describing ‘designing’ to me.

I hate to describe things too precisely. I can never get it ‘right’, and it tends to kill whatever was nice about the idea anyway. I prefer a vague understanding to the facts. But the idea here is really quite simple in the end. And maybe I’m trying to make too much of it? I think you’re after the idea that graphic design is the product of a complex series of interactions between people, technologies, pictures, and politics. I guess I’m saying I’m interested in the people part of that at the moment. And that this is where I now find some value in the ‘job’ of being a graphic designer. I always liked that I got to meet lots of interesting different people doing different interesting things. I’m quite picky about who I work for/with these days. I want to get something out of the relationship too. I’m getting a bit sick of one-night-stands.

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10. Yoko Akama. I first met Yoko in Melbourne when I went to start my postgraduate study there. She was one of Lisa’s students too, although she was a year or so ahead of me. She’s since upgraded to a PhD. I was hugely skeptical of her research, and once accused her of “pouring concrete over the grass”. I was a bit out of line, but I was trying to provoke her. She’s interested in ‘user-centred’ and ‘participatory design’ theories and approaches, whereas I tend to find these repugnant, almost offensive. I’ve had some really nicely heated discussions with her about this, and while our views and interests seem to be diametrically opposed, our conversations have helped me begin to articulate what it is that I don’t like about graphic design and design research. Obviously an important step toward figuring out what I do like.
I first met Steve when I moved from Wellington back to Christchurch in 2003. We initially bonded over a shared interest in music, then we eventually started playing in a band together (The Hi-Aces). About a year later Steve moved to Wellington to take up a job with the Waitangi Tribunal, which was when I realised he was actually an historian.

Steve’s girlfriend, Jayne, is a graphic designer. I think when I started talking to them about this project I thought she might contribute something. I didn’t really know Steve collected these postcards.

I did know Steve was fairly knowledgeable about New Zealand music though, and he’s currently working on an article about some Flying Nun records covers for our second issue.

I first met Lisa when I visited Melbourne to begin this research. She was my main supervisor initially, but then she moved to New York.

I should mention that Jonty, Lisa and I all studied design at the same school. And that Jonty and Lisa know each other quite well. But that I’m slightly younger and didn’t actually start until they’d both finished.

Anyway I was lucky enough to spend the first six months of this year in New York on study leave though, and of course I ended up seeing quite a bit of Lisa—talking to her about my research, life in general, and, obviously, this project.

Quite accidentally Jonty and I happened to be in New York at the same time. Funnily enough I ended up looking after Lisa’s apartment while she was away for a week, and Jonty actually came and stayed on her couch while we got started on this first issue.
The Lay of the Case: Putting NZ Communication Design on the Map

New Zealand can boast a varied and interesting design history that both reflects and diverges from international trends. However, the design of graphic design in New Zealand remains largely unacknowledged. It is imperative that New Zealand’s contributions are comprehensively recorded. This will help to ensure that future research can be conducted in a global design history and attempt to establish a case for the history of communication design in New Zealand by rettling existing narratives and shedding new light on the development of a strong bibliographic foundation of scholarship around New Zealand print culture. Our goal is to establish the lay of the field, rather than compare and contrast different design movements, but our ultimate aim would be to function together to establish local productions and encourage designers to develop new or under-developed areas.

I first met Noel when I went to Dunedin to install an exhibition of a typeface I had done at a gallery down there. Noel teaches design history at Otago University, and knows more about New Zealand’s typographic and print-oriented design history than anyone I know. The director of the gallery I was showing in put me in touch with Noel so he could show me around the design school. Anyway Noel’s really into letterpress printing, and there’s obviously a shared interest there, and so we ended up going out, drinking beer, and talking shit at some tiny little pub with a big fireplace.

Noel’s PhD was on the Caxton Press which was set up by Denis Glover in the 1950s. I went to design school with Denis’ granddaughter Pia Glover, and we fooled around and dated a bit. We're still good friends, and actually she lives in Melbourne now, and I stay with her sometimes when I visit RMIT.

I first met Jo—a friend of a friend—on one of my trips to Melbourne last year. I'd just recently met Dylan Herkes and was really into his band The Chandeliers, and it turned out that Jo was actually his girlfriend’s sister. Obviously we were off to a good start.

Jo studied graphic design at Wanganui Polytech, but hasn’t ever really ‘worked’ as a graphic designer. She’s really smart and so I think she struggles with the idea of professional practice. I couldn’t see her doing junk mail just to pay the bills if you know what I mean.

Anyway that first night we met Jo showed more than a passing interest in my research. Initially just inquisitive as to what I was actually doing in Melbourne, she then proceeded to dismantle my entire ‘thesis’ over more than a few drinks. I really liked the way she talked about design.

Go Genre Everything

I first met Hamish (Harold Grieves is a pseudonym) when he visited my friend and flatmate Malcolm Terry. Malcolm’s a painter and Hamish is on the board of the High St Project, an artist-run space in central Christchurch. Hamish and I got talking about manifestos, and discovered a shared interest in Rem Koolhaas’ writing—we were both reading Delirious New York.

Hamish publishes a lo-fi art fanzine called The John Dory Report, which I had seen around. He also writes for various other things—catalogues and such. And The Christchurch Press now and then. His writing is usually heavily criticised for being inaccessible, but like that it seems to inhabit the verge of sanity.

I first met Max as his student in ‘Typography’ at Canterbury University’s School of Fine Arts in 1993. As I’ve already mentioned Max had also taught Jonty and Lisa. And while he’s since passed away, he seemed to be ‘in the air’ while we were putting this first issue together. Our reproduction of his text in our first issue is partly ironic (me) and partly homage (Jonty). Writing about design, especially Graphic Design, has never been very well documented or distributed in New Zealand, and while we’re interested in digging up texts (corpses) from the past, this one—a link to our shared beginnings—seemed particularly appropriate for our first issue.
I first met Hamish (Harold Grieves is a pseudonym) when he visited my friend and flatmate Malcolm Terry. Malcolm’s a painter and Hamish is on the board of the High St Project, an artist-run space in central Christchurch. Hamish and I got talking about manifestos, and discovered a shared interest in Rem Koolhaas’ writing — we were both reading *Delirious New York* at the time.

Hamish publishes a lo-fi art fanzine called The John Dory Report, which I’d seen around. He also writes for various other things — catalogues and such. And The Christchurch Press now and then. His writing is usually heavily criticised for being inaccessible, but like that it seems to inhabit the verge of sanity.

Hamish’s writing often seems to chart some grey area between art and design, and as such seemed appropriate to our own marginal ideas for this project. He’s working on something for our next issue about ‘tilt-slab’ prefabricated architecture.

I first met Max as his student in ‘Tipo-Graphic Design’ at Canterbury University’s School of Fine Arts in 1993. As I’ve already mentioned Max had also taught Jonty and Lisa. And while he’s since passed away, he seemed to be ‘in the air’ while we were putting this first issue together.

Our reproduction of his text in our first issue is partly ironic (me) and partly homage (Jonty). Writing about design, especially Graphic Design, has never been very well documented or distributed in New Zealand, and while we’re interested in digging up texts (corpses) from the past, this one — a link to our shared beginnings — seemed particularly appropriate for our first issue.
Peripheral activities

I often refer to The National Grid project. I do so because it’s the ‘project’ I’m interested in, more-so than the product; the printed artefact. I’m referring to the peripheral, marginal, and background activities involved here—the applications for funding, the contributors, the distribution, the feedback, and our using it to approach people who we wouldn’t have thought we could. Things like that.

And it’s actually on this perhaps rather anticlimactic note that I want to bring this project—this exegesis—to a close.

I read an interview with Richard Hollis recently in which he was asked; “If you were starting out now, would you still choose to be a designer?”

To which he replied; “I’d do something else. Not because of feelings about design, but because the world and technology have changed so completely. I started out with the idea of not doing anything in particular, or of ‘total’ design. With theatre design for Kidderminster Rep I could lay out the programme, design and paint the sets, and have a walk-on part—that integrated activity really interested me.”

Richard’s hit the nail on the head—nothing in particular, total design,... the walk-on part. All these things describe why I think I’m really enjoying this project, and reciprocally allude to how I am now able to engage in a much healthier, more faithful, relationship with graphic design.

To a large degree perhaps this is about ownership? Or authorship? Sure, control probably has a lot to do with it. But it’s that integrated activity that Hollis refers to that really interests me too.

I really like Stuart Bailey’s idea that graphic design is a ghost. I refer to it all the time. He’s talking about it not being an a priori discipline; “I meant that graphic design only exists when other subjects exist first”. But the way he describes it makes it sound very much like the kind of practice I’m after—“both a grey area and a meeting point”.

And it’s that grey area I’m foolishly attempting to leave you in here. The spaces between the images, sounds, and texts—between, before, and after, the making and the artefacts... the walk-on part, and some understanding that these marginal spaces are in fact the generative gaps I require...

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Welcome to issue #1 of The National Grid. You either emailed us and asked for it, or you were pseudo-randomly selected out of admiration, from memory, Google, and/or friends of friends.

We thought that rather than publicise something like this — a marginal publication aiming to document peripheral parts of a pervasive practice — we could just send out a few for free and see if the idea took.

Further copies can be purchased from our website...
www.thenationalgrid.co.nz

We'd appreciate any feedback you might want to offer, and can be contacted through the website. Anyone interested in contributing to future issues should also contact us through the website.

While we will be attempting two issues a year, The National Grid will be published as and when we find the time and money.

Regards,

Luke Wood & Jonty Valentine (Editors)
Hi there

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBERS (ISSN)

The International Standard Serial Number, ISSN 1177-2468 has been reserved for your serial title: The National Grid

The ISSN should be grouped as shown above and printed in a prominent position on each issue (front cover, title page, masthead). The preferred position is in the top right-hand corner of the front cover of each issue.

Although its use from the first issue is welcomed, the ISSN cannot be reported to the ISSN International Centre in Paris, until the serial has been sighted.

So that reporting is not delayed, it is essential that the enclosed form be completed and sent with the two copies of the first issue/issue to the Legal Deposit Office. You are required to supply two copies of every subsequent issue published to the Legal Deposit Office, PO Box 12340, Wellington (as required under section 31 of the National Library of New Zealand (Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa) Act 2003).

To avoid confusion when there is a title change pending, please request a new ISSN.

Please contact me if you need any further information.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Evans
for

Helen Brown
International Standard Serial Numbers Librarian
Telephone: (64) 474-3091
Facsimile: (64) 474-3161
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total: $50

Payable to: Luke Wood
31a Bixworth St
Hillsborough
Christchurch
In some ways it feels a bit silly to end with this stuff. I'm concerned it'll either look like I'm on some election rally, or possibly the complete opposite—and this may just seem ridiculous. Anyhow, I've decided to leave these documents here—it doesn't seem any more narcissistic than anything preceding it?—as they provide some sort of picture of the kinds of interesting peripheral interactions and activities that this project has opened up for us.
Luke,

wanna forward this on to Harold?
Jonty

Begin forwarded message:

Hi Jonty

Anna Miles suggested that I contact you. I'm working at Wintec and are wanting to invite Harold to participate in Spark 06 and were hoping you may have a contact email or phone for him.

I look forward to talking soon

Kindest Regards

Robyn

---

Robyn Johnston
CIRC (Creative Industries Research Centre)
Wintec (Waikato Technical Institute)
Tristram St, PO Box 3036,
Hamilton, Aotearoa/NZ
Ph: +64 (0) 7 836 888 ex 8046
Fax: +64 (0) 7 858 0227

SPARK 06: http://www.spark.net.nz
RAMP Magazine: http://www.rampmagazine.org/
RAMP: http://www.ramp-ln.netaki.org

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Message number 22

Message number 22

Display

Message number 22

e-mail trash 

All headers

Date: 02/08/2006 02:56:06
From: Experimental Jetset <experimental@jetset.net.nz>
To: The National Grid <info@thenationalgrid.co.nz>
Subject: The National Grid.

Hello,

Thanks for sending us that copy of TNG. It looked really good. It slightly reminded us of Dot Dot Dot, which we admit is a shallow observation; and then again, they certainly don't own the format.

But although the format seems familiar, the content is quite exotic to our euro-centric eyes: the only name we recognized was that of Lisa Goccio, who we met a couple of times. All the other names and subjects were new to us, which we found really refreshing.

The Zombie Manifesto reminded us of an e-mail conversation we had a while ago with our friend Mark Owens.

Mark wrote an article for the latest issue of DDD, and he sent an early draft to us, just to hear what we thought of it. In the article, he wrote something about "reclaiming 'Zombie Modernism' as a positive term", and one of the things we wrote back to him was this:

> The idea of 'zombie' as a positive term has always played a big role in punk and new wave. I think it's very much linked to the concept of a post-apocalyptic utopia: the idea of being reborn through nuclear annihilation. A lot of comics that appeared in RAW around that time (such as 2000AD) were completely centered around this idea.
> And I think that even the 'day-glo' colours of new wave point to this idea (as day-glo refers to radiation).
> When I was 14/15, I was really into psychobilly, and the concept of zombies played a big part in that subculture too (from the top of my head, I remember this Notesera song called Zombi Noise).
> But even before punk and new wave, the zombie played a big role in rock culture. There's of course British 60s band The Zombies, but I'm particularly thinking about the Black From The Grave series, a series of Garage Rock records that had a large impact on the punk and psychobility scene.
> On each of these sleeves, zombies were shown. Zombies attacking contemporary culture: performing some sort of apocalyptic 'aesthetic cleansing'.
> So yeah. The zombie is an interesting image, representing the apocalyptic (biblical) idea of old forces being reborn.
> But to be honest, I like your term, 'bastard modernism', much better than 'zombie modernism', as the concept of the 'bastard' is much more synthetic (synthetic as in, uniting opposite forces), and in my view, today's renewed interest in modernism has more to do with synthesis than with neo- or retro-sentiments.
> Okay, these are my thoughts. Just some ramblings.
> Sorry for the sloppy writing.

This is just a fragment of a much larger mail.
I wanted to write something called 'Grid Theory' for this first issue. Something huge and evangelical, but ultimately compact and entirely self-contained.
Dear Luke

Thanks to you and Jonny for taking the time to meet up with me and discuss what you’re proposing for ‘The National Grid’. I think it’s a great idea. Our industry needs more people like you engaging with the creative community.

I (and I can speak for a large number of like-minded people in the industry when I say this) welcome your notion of establishing a new vehicle for open forum, debate and banter among the creative industry (both locally and abroad).

There’s been much talk of something like this, yet no-one seems to have the time to really launch anything like it. It’s time.

I hope that I can offer ongoing contribution as ‘The National Grid’ establishes itself as a new voice for the creative community.

I wish you every success.

Yours sincerely,
Fred I Ami

20 July 2006

Dear Harkness Fund Committee,

I am writing in support of The National Grid’s application for the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts ‘Harkness Fund’. In a short space of time since the journal’s inception and its first edition. The National Grid has positioned itself as New Zealand’s only critical design journal, filling a much needed gap in critical design discourse within the New Zealand design community. The journal’s independent positioning free from commercial restraints, gives it the freedom to explore ideas, concepts and methods relating to design within a broader cultural framework.

I believe The National Grid expresses an engaged and considered response to the cultural climate in which editors Luke Wood and Jonny Valentine operate. They understand the importance of quality research into the role and function design has in our everyday lives. From this standpoint they have engaged writers, designers, and artists to contribute to the publication with writings or page works based on their areas of interest, as way of activating discussion about and around notions of design. Luke and Jonny are both engaged and critical members of New Zealand design and cultural communities, and have well developed networks of designers, writers, and artists who are keen to contribute.

The commitment of Luke and Jonny, who are eager to establish a much needed avenue for critical discourse, as well as the support they have gained from a broad range of contributors writing on a range of subjects, suggests the energy The National Grid is already generating. This support will continue to grow as the publication develops. The Harkness Fund support at this early stage will allow the publication to develop without commercial or editorial constraints, and to burgeon over the coming year as it gains a footing within the design and arts community.

In addition to this, Luke’s experience as both a designer and lecturer, working across a range of projects independently and collaboratively, ensures he is capable of maintaining the energy and dynamism of The National Grid’s first edition into the future.

I wish Luke all the best for his application, and welcome the opportunity to discuss this further.

Yours sincerely,

Danase Moasman
Director
The Physics Room
THE NATIONAL GRID #2
A publication for practitioner-oriented research and writing on graphic and communication design

RATIONALE
The National Grid is a project inspired by a concern for the prolonged lack of critical discourse within the discipline and tradition of Graphic Design in New Zealand. This area is currently served by a single publication—Prodesign—whose content is predominantly advertorial and trade-related, how to get a job, how to run a successful studio, new products. As a result NZ based practitioners look to international publications for critical thinking about contemporary practice.

The National Grid offers a departure from the kinds of writing and representation previously available to graphic design in New Zealand. The focus of The National Grid is on framing a discourse that is more specifically cultural than political, technological, or economic.

Recent government-led initiatives such as the Design Taskforce and Better By Design have identified the design industry as a key player in New Zealand’s creative and economic future. Yet the focus of such initiatives is on the business community as the commissioner and client of design. There is, as yet, no real focus on the development of the discipline that actually provides the service.

OBJECTIVES
While our rationale remains largely the same as in our 2005 application, our objectives have been modified slightly through what we’ve learnt from the publication of issue #1. In the previous application we stated the overall objectives of the publication in general and in the long-term (these objectives are reproduced in the ‘Report’ that accompanies this document). Within this application, and our intentions for issue #2, our objectives are more targeted and specific. These are:
— to encourage and promote a community of critically engaged practitioners—both willing and able to write about issues and/or projects related to contemporary graphic design, either ‘within’ or ‘into’ the New Zealand context.
— to investigate potentials and possibilities for alternative small-scale and self-controlled models of distribution.
— to continue to locate and muster a growing local and international audience for this project.

Within our initial objective above is the realisation that only through doing a project like this, through being able to provide the publication as a platform, will this community and discourse evolve. The development of such a community is obviously necessary for the project to move toward the adoption of a relevant and useful peer review process.

The objectives in relation to developing distribution and audience are obviously inter-related. An outcome of our experiences with issue #1 has been our discovery of the potential for an international audience. We have also realised that, as a niche publication, we can probably begin to design a relatively effective model for self-controlled international distribution, based around the understanding that within most major cities there are two or three bookstores which most designers will visit. So far issue #1 has been made available in Sydney, Melbourne, and New York. With issue #2 we would like to expand into targeted bookstores in the UK and in Europe.
Memorandum

School of Fine Arts
Office: Room 211, Block 2
Extension: 6161
Email: desmond.rochfort@canterbury.ac.nz

To: Luke Wood
From: Professor Desmond Rochfort
CC: 
Date: 15 August 2006
Subject: Harkness Fund Application

Dear Luke

I am writing to advise you that the Harkness Fund Committee considered your project was good and the proposal professionally compiled.

As you were supported last year for $6,138, the Committee has a concern that the Harkness Fund’s terms of reference do not state that it can be annually tapped into for the same project, but ‘one-off’ projects are prioritised. The Committee believes the journal that has been produced is good and that if you would like continued support from the School, the School should discuss this matter. The Committee has agreed to award your application $3,000 towards the costs of your proposal.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Desmond Rochfort
Head of School
A Summary

The retroactive aims and objectives of this research have been to:

1. **Reinvent** my own practice...
   to learn to ‘come at’ graphic design differently.

2. **Re-enage** with graphic design...
   to open up possibilities and potential that I had previously been unaware of within the domain of graphic design.

The work has been practice-led, project-based, highly reflective and entirely selfish. As a result the research has tended toward autobiography, and your ‘researcher’ has inevitably become quite monstrous at times, having spent so long in front of the mirror. Embodied in the texts and images of the research however, is a palpable change of spirit—a monstrous reinvention emerging from three inter-related, but distinct, common threads within the work—disenchantment, provocation, and engagement.

The discoveries of the research are based around the deficiencies of the practice I was so disenchanted by, and motivated through an ‘other’ practice that I enjoy. From the practical development of a more personally resonant frame of reference has come an understanding that the complexity and provocation I need to be engaged, can—in part—be generated from within the practice itself. In this respect the self-initiated project is a fundamental part, or discovery, within my renewed sense of practice.

Closely related to the practitioner’s ability to disrupt and reinvent themselves, has been an evolving appreciation for the importance of the community the practice is situated within. Having worked in relative isolation previously, this research documents my growing discovery of a like-minded community, and the reciprocal generative benefits inherent in such connections. Largely my lack of engagement with graphic design was symptomatic of my dislocation from the community of practice in the first place. And so, my application of the monstrous metaphor to creative practice has served to illuminate the significance of marginal pursuits and practices that tend to inhabit the periphery of the domain.
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Music


The Cramps, 1980. Songs The Lord Taught Us. A&M.


Acknowledgements

I want to thank the following people without whom I most definitely would not have survived the hideous transformation you have witnessed here

Lisa Grocott and Laurene Vaughan for their support and supervision,

Anna Dean for her patience,

Jonty Valentine for conversation,

Emilie Sitzia for the same,

Aaron Beehre for technical support and bass guitar,

Oscar Guerrero for walking the dog,

the University of Canterbury,

my students over the last three years,

and most importantly the other postgraduate students I have been working with (at a distance!) for the duration of this research.