Using triggers in a practice-led research methodology to challenge the conventions of communication design

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Declaration

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I acknowledge that Andrew Macrae contributed to copyediting this work.

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Introduction

This project uses a practice-led research methodology to explore the question of how triggers in an exhibition context can challenge the conventions of communication design. It consists of my exhibition *10 incomplete things from an imaginary life* and this critical exegesis, which examines and unpacks the lessons I learned from the practice. The exegesis also places my practice in the context of the work of the artists who were part of the *Pictures Generation* exhibition curated by Douglas Eklund in 2009. Using this work as a springboard, I attempt to build a theoretical framework to challenge my assumptions about communication design, and to create a more open and nuanced approach to design that is less centred around marketing and more engaged with community and sustainability. A key part of this is the idea that an incomplete work leaves space for the viewer to create their own meaning, thus opening up a visual conversation rather than simply drawing on a fixed visual language.

The objects of the practice themselves are purposely not intended to represent design objects or new designs in an aesthetic sense, or to fit within the conventional notions of what design is. They are constructed with as little as possible of what would be considered my hand or my voice. The intention with this approach is to invite the audience to make meaning of the works, not for me to encode meaning within the work in the traditional sense of an author. The works are simply cultural artifacts, removed from me as much as possible. The traditional model of communication design sees that design work is original and created by the designer. My exhibition sought to challenge this model by re-
appropriating mostly existing works and displaying them in a new context. The irony of their placement within a gallery allows the viewer to reflect on the design conventions employed in everyday objects. Through this method of research, I reframed the objects to call attention to the way that in their usual context, these objects incorporate the conventions of communication design to engage the audience in a predetermined way. I wanted to show that communication design practice can be more than communication; it can be a form of research into the nature of communication itself. By focusing on the notion of triggers – the idea that the works created a space for audience reaction – the exhibition is in fact practice-led research that ultimately aims to reconceptualise the communication design discipline.

Methodology

In this research, I am using an understanding of visual communication that holds that design is more than a spontaneous creative act – it can be studied and used as part of a research project that examines the design process itself (Petelin 2006). While art history, cultural studies and other disciplines have refined methodologies (Petelin 2006), the methodologies for communication design research are in their early stages of development. This project adopts a practice-led methodology, with an emphasis on exploring the nature of communication design practice and how to extend it, rather than creating and reflecting on new design activities. The contribution of the project is not demonstrated through the exhibition works themselves (Collins 2010 & Smith 2009 n.d.) but through a design approach that explores assumptions and provokes a fresh consideration
(Dunne & Raby 2001) of communication design practice that will have operational significance. To appropriate words used to describe the work of the 2011 Nobel Prize winner for Literature, Tomas Tranströmer, I was looking for a design approach that would ‘find a fresh way into reality’ (Lea & Flood 2011).

Although the terms practice-led research and practice-based research are often used interchangeably, they are quite different. In the practice-based approach critical appraisal or analysis is provided in the text but the contribution to design knowledge is demonstrated through the outcomes themselves – that is, the creative work is the basis of the contribution (Candy n.d., Collins 2010 & Smith 2009). In practice-led research, the contribution to design knowledge is demonstrated through the insights and reflections the work has prompted, which in turn contributes to improving the practice of communication design (Candy n.d., Collins 2010 & Smith 2009). In my case, the practice-led design approach contributed to the extension of my practice and how I understand communication design. My research attempted to trigger a reframing of communication design by challenging its definition of what design is.

As Faust states, ‘When we reframe design through a discourse, designing on a meta level, we are actually designing design, as we are giving design a different meaning, changing frame to include or exclude what we do or don’t consider as a part of the field’ (Faust 2010, p. 109). This highlights the potential of a practice-led methodology to reframe communication design and to broaden traditional boundaries to trigger a challenge to the conventions of communication design. Faust goes on to present a compelling argument for the
transformative power of design, and, indirectly, for the practice-led methodology that I have used to challenge and extend notions of conventional design:

...design has its own history, context, and underlying discourse. It also uses discursive means to change existing situations, even creating preferred theories of design. This is what is meant by 'designing design': framing design in a new way, providing new possibilities and responsibilities. In seeing that what we can design can be extended, it puts our understanding of change on a very different level’ (Faust 2010, p. 111).

Taking this further, as Graeme Sullivan argues, art practice itself can be seen as research that is both creative and critical, and which can host forms of inquiry that are part of the theoretical, structural, interpretive and critical traditions of visual arts (Sullivan 2006).

The exegesis is structured as a three-part narrative that moves from my position as a designer before the project, through the process of designing the exhibition, to how the research informs my practice now. After a brief introduction of the concept of practice-led research, I move into a discussion of how, as a professional designer, I used the conventions of communication design in my practice. I highlight this through an example, which also serves to define what I mean by conventional design. The second part of the exegesis explores the moment that propelled me into this research project: my experience of the *Pictures Generation* exhibition in New York in 2009. From there, I look at the critical implications of the work of the Pictures Generation artists, and the impact this had on my own practice, which is examined in detail in the next section. Due to length constraints, I have limited my discussion to six of the ten
works I exhibited. The six I chose to discuss are the most representative of the approach I wanted to take. The remaining four works are included in an appendix.

The final section examines how my practice-led research methodology has influenced my current work, and ties together some conclusions and lessons learned from the concept of using incomplete works as triggers to challenge the conventions of communication design.
Design conventions

As a starting point to my research, it is important to outline what I see as the conventions of communication design that I wanted to challenge. The values represented in these conventions are conservative and corporate in nature. They present a view that things should stay the same and do not invite active participation in the conversation between the work and the audience. As Heiligmann and Shields argue, the visual texts of communication design use ‘a visual grammar that simultaneously limits the viewer’s position in relation to the codes within the text while encouraging a personalized interpretation. These visual messages shape our concepts of identity, as well as culture, history and social processes’ (2005, p. 41).

This visual grammar can be seen in this example of a Bed Bath N’ Table catalogue that I produced on as a professional designer.

**Figure 1: Bed Bath N’ Table catalogue**
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It features a consistent visual language, made up of art direction, typographic and layout design. There is little variation – the type remains consistent both in the typeface used but also in the way it is integrated with the design. It is placed in a reassuring symmetrical layout, with plenty of space around it to convey a sense of order or even control. The typeface itself is a well-balanced classic sans serif, Futura, expressive of the 1950s. It is a familiar typeface and represents familiar values that are consistent with the brand values.

The style of the photography and the art direction are also consistent with every other photograph that represents the brand. They are tightly controlled and directed to remain within a constrained set of visual codes. The visual tone of the images stays the same in each representation and this is conveyed in the lighting used in the photograph, the angle of the shot and the claims the image makes. The images offer family values around an emotionally warm, safe and colourful family space. They draw on ideas and values that exist in the coding of the target audience to trigger this interpretation of the image. In this aspect, the Bed Bath N’ Table catalogue is made up of ‘signs that are situated along dominant paths made of visual images and written text, with each sign along the path acting as conduits for the reader influencing the interpretation of all subsequent signs by generating meaning momentum’ (Heiligmann and Shields 2005, p. 43).

My job as the art director and designer of Bed Bath N’ Table sale posters, sale catalogues, magazines and packaging was to maintain a singular voice that speaks of this warm family space. It is not a flexible proposition nor does it invite the audience to contribute. It offers instead a fixed set of assumptions made through the image, type and its composition. It attempts to ‘fix the meaning’ (Hall
1997), determining that there is one message that can be read and only one way to engage in the conversation. The catalogue branding says, ‘I know you, we are good friends, I know what you want. I share your values.’ As the designer, it is my conscious aim to build these messages into the visual branding, which becomes a personality in itself, with values and feelings. This is the point made by Polegato and Bjerke in their work on audience reception of Benetton ads – there is a strong association between consumers’ values, the values they associate with a brand and they brands they like (2006).

The corporate tone displayed in the catalogue is an expression of the relationship between the work and the audience. It is also a reflection of the positioning of the designer in terms of their understanding of their role in the conversation. As Storkerson states, ‘The meanings we create when we combine elements such as images and texts go far beyond what could be inferred from any element alone or by a summation of all. Rather, the elements transform and extend each other by specifying otherwise indeterminate domains, to create a new a configuration of the whole, or gestalt’ (Storkerson 2012, p. 2). The conventional notion of the designer’s role, that which permeated my education in the late 1980s, was that I was to use this gestalt to create a corporate visual identity for my client. This positions the audience at arms length to the dialogue and gives the impression the viewer is a passive receiver of the message.

This is the process and the conventions that I set out to question and problematise with my exhibition. I wanted to use my experience of the Pictures Generation exhibition to challenge the traditional role of the designer, which Ülle Linnuste characterises as the mediator between the manufacturer and the consumer (Linnuste 2012). The Pictures Generation artists were the first
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generation to grow up in a media-saturated environment and their work directly engaged with the conventions of this image-culture which drew heavily on the language of advertising, as I shall explain in the next section.
Before discussing the Pictures Generation and its influence on my exhibition, I want to emphasise that there is a debate about who is and isn’t included in the movement. Even using the term ‘Pictures Generation’ or referring to the group of artists as a ‘movement’ divides critics (see Iversen 2010, Saltz 2009 and Schwabsky 2009).

Douglas Crimp was the first to use the term ‘Pictures Generation’. He was a prominent professor and art critic at the School of Visual Arts in New York (1971–76) and from 1977 he edited New York-based art journal October (Schulman 2007). In 1977 Crimp staged an exhibition entitled Pictures at the Artists Space, New York. The exhibition featured works from emerging young artists Jack Goldstein, Troy Brauntuch, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo and Phillip Smith. From the outset, Crimp claimed the exhibition was epoch-defining. The accompanying 1977 catalogue boldly stated that ‘these artists represent a larger trend that marks the first significant shift in current art since the demise of conceptual art and the pervasive media involvement in the seventies’ (Crimp 1977, p. 1).

In his late 1970s essays, Crimp broadened the category ‘Pictures’ to include ‘photography, film and performance, as well as traditional modes of painting, drawing and sculpture,’ (Crimp 1979, p. 75). Instead of being defined by the medium, Crimp elevated Pictures Generation to the ‘predominant sensibility among the current generation of younger artists, or at least any group of artists who remain committed to radical innovation’ (Crimp 1979, p. 75). In contrast to the ‘modernist aesthetic categories’ of the day, Crimp used an idea of ‘radical
innovation’ as a way to ‘pose questions that are postmodernist’ (Crimp 1979, p. 88). Positioning Pictures Generation art as a postmodern mode of questioning in this way ‘marks not only a rethinking of the subjects’ relationship to the visual, but also a significant shift in subjectivity itself’ (Eisenhauer 2006, p. 155).

Redefining the subject or viewer as active in the process of making meaning from the work makes the viewer active in categorisation. This means that even in the late 1970s, Pictures Generation art as a label rested entirely in the subjective eye of the viewer. Pictures Generation is not really a meaningful category of art – instead it is more a sensibility and at its core a suggestion of the impact of the art on the viewer. I used this concept for the creative practice in my exhibition, and it ties into the way that triggers can be used to raise questions to challenge design conventions.

While Crimp included ‘traditional modes of painting, drawing and sculpture’ (1979, p. 75) as suitable vehicles for Pictures Generation, the most challenging and interesting artists of the era had abandoned the tools of the traditional artist to instead work with objects from popular culture, in particular the advertising work of communication designers. Of the original group of artists included in Crimp’s 1977 exhibition, Sherrie Levine’s work from this period is arguably the purest example of the direction of Pictures Generation art in the late 1970s (Schjeldahl 2009). In her 1979 work ‘Untitled (Presidents)’, Levine displays advertising images from a woman’s fashion magazine, cut out as profiles of US Presidents Washington, Lincoln and Kennedy.
Levine's work is presented in a way that suggests the images must somehow be read in conjunction with each other. Writing on Levine's work, Crimp notes, 'these pictures have no autonomous power of signification... Levine steals them away from their usual place in our culture and subverts the mythology' (Crimp 1979, p. 85). When viewing the work, 'you can't look at the ad and the profile at the same time; your brain won't do it. Nor perhaps can you reconcile the feelings associated with Abraham Lincoln and fashion ads' (Schjeldahl 2009).

‘Untitled (Presidents)’ asks the viewer a question: what does a women’s fashion advertisement have to do with three dead American presidents? By simply forcing the images into the same frame, the work brings into focus the underlying conventions, not just of women's fashion advertisements or political profiles, but of images more broadly. In this deceptively simple work, visual

Figure 2: Levine, Sherry 1979, 'Untitled (President Series)'

Image removed due to copyright issues.
culture is recast as postmodern discourse, a ‘post-disciplinary space of inquiry’ (Eisenhauer 2006, p. 156). The selected image of a mother and child pushes the viewer to question the way women are positioned in conventional visual culture, and the broader political and social implications of this positioning (Yablonsky 2009, p. 108). The generic (even ironic) title, ‘Untitled (Presidents)’, provides almost no guide for viewers to form their opinions. Any conceptual map viewers use to attribute meaning (Jameson 1991, p. 416) to Levine’s work must come from the interaction between the work and the viewers’ own ideas about women, presidents, culture and gender more broadly.

Levine’s exploration of the intersection between visual culture and meaning-creation directly relates to the time period the Pictures Generation artists were working in. The Pictures Generation artists were the first generation to grow up in a media-soaked environment. The conceptual change that Crimp saw in the work of Pictures Generation artists was part of the bigger changes happening in American culture. Their work explored what it meant to be ‘born into the swarm of images spawned by the rapidly expanding postwar consumer’ (Eklund 2009a, p. 16). While a media-driven environment is very familiar today, the Pictures Generation artists experienced it from its starting point.

This new consumer age gave birth to new anxieties, and there is a strong theme in the works chosen by Crimp (and by Douglas Eklund in the 2009 retrospective) of artists trying to make sense of rapid change. Art critic Peter Schjeldal describes the artists responding to these shifts by ‘making a theatre of their own anxieties’ (Schjeldahl 2009). This idea of Pictures Generation art as theater is a theme that brings together many of the late 1970s artists. With the
collapse of the ‘utopian promise of counterculture [into]... a commercialized pastiche of rebellious stances prepackaged for consumption’ (Eklund 2009a, p. 16), the Pictures Generation artists changed the points of artistic reference and aesthetics.

In the view of many Pictures Generation artists, it was impossible to produce work that existed outside of popular culture, consumerism and the visual language of advertising and communication design. Image culture was, in many ways, at the forefront of the ‘prodigious new expansion of multinational capital... [into] the very precapitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious) which offered extraterritorial and Archimedian footholds for critical effectivity’ (Jameson 1991, p. 49). Responding to this challenge, the radicals producing Pictures Generation art reclaimed pictures as a means to sharpen rather than dull this critical effectivity. The work of advertisers and communication designers was re-appropriated and re-imagined as the material in this theatrical play.

Critical image theory played a key role in this artistic development. In his influential 1957 collection of essays Mythologies, Roland Barthes presented one of the first critical analyses of the postwar visual culture (Barthes 1957). Barthes was popular among the Pictures Generation artists and his essay ‘The Death of the Author’ was first published in Aspen, the American avant-garde magazine popular with Pictures Generation group (Iversen 2010, 128). The connection Barthes made between popular culture and metaphorical meaning in Mythologies is an idea many of the late-1970s Pictures Generation artists used in their practice. One of the central themes of Pictures Generation art, drawn from Barthes, was that ‘designed artefacts operate in a mass consumer culture less as
functional objects and more as metaphoric vehicles of collective desire’ (Huppatz 2011, p. 85). As art and ‘culture’ had became systems of consumption, artists like Levine and Jack Goldstein drew from images that were ‘pre-packaged for consumption’ as the basic tools of their art practice. Jack Goldstein’s 1975 ‘Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’, which was part of Crimp’s original 1977 exhibition, directly appropriates the iconic 1924 Lion’s roar that opened countless Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer films (Iversen 2010). Goldstein does not alter the 51-year-old symbol but rather lets the clip play forever on a closed loop. Like Levine’s later work, the title gives nothing away. Does the image celebrate cinema? Or is it ‘a hard joke on the empty repetitions of the Hollywood machine… the subliminal power of movies to hypnotize us in its movements, its lulling images, its repetitions’ (Saltz 2009)?
Like Levine’s ‘Untitled (Presidents)’, the answers and the interpretation lie almost entirely outside the work. Both artists celebrate what Foucault would later call ‘the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations’ (Foucault 1969). Giving his work the most ordinary title imaginable and feeding entirely off popular culture, Goldstein points back at the viewer provocatively. Like the iconic commercial emblem it is drawn from, ‘Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’ is simply a trigger that only vaguely hints at what comes next.

Not all Pictures Generation art was so clearly connected to postmodern theory. Barbara Kruger, a contemporary of both Levine and Goldstein, also produced a body of work drawn from advertisements and popular culture. However, instead of embracing the postmodern ‘death of the author’ theory (Barthes 1967), Kruger directly challenged them. Fashioning ‘found’ images

with irony-laden slogans such as ‘Your Moments of Joy Have the Precision of Military Strategy’, and ‘Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face’ (both 1981), Kruger’s work provided a ready-made critique already in the work. In ‘Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face’, an idealised sculpture of a woman’s face is overlaid with the title, unfolding word-by-word down the margin of the image.

**Figure 4: Kruger, Barbara 1981, 'Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face'**

*Image removed due to copyright issues.*

Eklund notes that Kruger uses the disconnection between the words and image to highlight both the ‘power statement inherent in the way male artists (and the viewers of their work) use the female form’ and also to reproduce ‘the burning sensation of a man’s leering eye’s upon a women in public’ (2009b, p. 249). Instead of the open meanings in Levine’s and Goldstein’s titles, Kruger uses her title to forcefully put ‘total control over the interpretation of the image that is meant to be demythologized’ (Schwabsky 2009, p. 29). Kruger controls
meaning through the title, but the substance of ‘Your Gaze’ points back at the viewer and their ability to critically assess the artwork. The ‘you’ in the text places the audience in a pre-defined gender role, much as the idealised sculpture displays a certain view of feminine beauty. Kruger’s use of a photograph of a sculptured image from fine art in the place of an advertisement or piece of contemporary communication design also extends the challenge posed by Pictures Generation artists to beyond post-war image culture, to the world of fine art and culture more broadly. Most import though is the challenge of Kruger’s work. The viewer is forced to be active in reading these works and is directly and aggressively challenged.

This element of challenge and rebellion is what separates these late 1970s and early 1980s artworks of the Pictures Generation artists from Warhol’s earlier Pop Art. Work like Kruger’s, with its overt political agenda, uses techniques found in Pop Art to trigger the audience into, if not action, at least shock and critical engagement. While Warhol focused on, and celebrated surfaces,

‘...for Pictures [artists], there is something behind the surface and it’s another, even emptier and more disquieting, surface. Sometimes that other surface can be identified as a form of ideological manipulation, and when it is, the resulting work acts as a form of demythologization’ (Schwabsky 2009, p. 29).

It is this process of demythologisation that allows so much of Pictures Generation art to expose the political underpinnings of popular culture and the techniques and conventions used in communication design – techniques I unconsciously and intuitively applied every day in my communication design practice. In this process, the usually invisible ‘bridge between information and
understanding’ (Berman 2009, p. 1) used by communication designers – and in the case of ‘Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face’, fine art – is clearly and sometimes crudely apparent to the viewer. This re-appropriation of images, informed by ‘a mix of cynicism, anxiety and nostalgia,’ (Cotter 2009) exposes and subverts the metaphoric power Barthes finds in the new image culture. Likewise, the positioning of these works as art rather than design further blurs the line between the two disciplines, holding communication design to the same level of deep analysis traditionally reserved for high art. As a communication designer, it is this challenge that marks my personal connection to the work of the Pictures Generation artists. Pictures Generation art is not just a challenge posed to the art world, but also a challenge aimed at the heart of communication design practice, and this is why I believe it is still significant today.

The popularity of Pictures Generation art, like most late 20th century art movements, has waxed and waned in the intervening years. It is the recent work of Douglas Eklund, and his detailed 2009 retrospective _Pictures Generation_ that effectively re-launched the movement’s challenge into the 21st century. The broad categorisation of Pictures Generation art that I am using in this exegesis owes a large debt to Eklund. It was also Eklund’s 2009 New York retrospective (at the Metropolitan Museum of Art) that introduced me to Pictures Generation Art – and the impact that the exhibition had on me was profound. It provided me with the ‘fresh way into reality’ that I was looking for. In the notes to the _Pictures Generation_ exhibition, Eklund states that the Pictures Generation artists, ‘who were inherently suspicious of all groups... constituted the last movement in art’ (Eklund 2009a, p. 18). Eklund states that the Pictures Generation should be defined by the time period they worked in, where artists rode ‘the crest of the
wave... into the world we inhabit now... the society of spectacle’ (Eklund 2009a, p. 19). By focusing on a historical period, Eklund includes the broadest possible grouping of the Pictures Generation.

Eklund’s approach is not universally accepted, however. Reviewing the 2009 exhibition, Saltz describes the exhibition as ‘less a critical survey of a highly influential aesthetic than a feel-good class reunion’ (2009). Schwabsky expands on Saltz’s objections, noting that the presentation of the Pictures Generation as a cohesive art movement ‘ignores the distinct groups of artists who make up [the retrospective]’ (Schwabsky, pp. 28–30). Schwabsky identifies two key groups of Pictures Generation artists, the first ‘former students of Baldessari’s at Cal Arts who had moved east to New York’ and the second, a group ‘less academic in formation and more working class in origin’ from Buffalo who migrated to New York (Schwabsky 2009, p. 27). While these criticisms provide additional depth to analysis of the Pictures Generation artists, they limit its range.

Putting aside these minor quibbles about where the artists came from, the main limitation of Eklund’s exhibition is a problem that is common to all retrospectives. By joining individual works together into a larger whole, Eklund risks watering down the attitude and individuality of the artists – the feature Crimp argued was the only real criteria of ‘Pictures Art’ (Crimp 1979, p. 75). Focusing on developments in art through the use of photography and media collage, Eklund’s work ignores some of the different currents in the movement. He does not give enough attention to the fact that the Pictures Generation movement was the first time ‘women... entered the art world at levels equal in importance to their male counterparts’ (Yablonsky 2009, p. 107). And as Fowle says, framing the Pictures Generation as a movement in art ‘sacrifices... the
artists’ passionate outspokenness, which is the legacy that we’re most needing to inject back into our culture now’ (2009). Looked at this way, it may be misleading for Eklund to have placed the Pictures Generation artworks as a generational narrative. After all, the Pictures Generation artists wanted to draw attention to this artificial and modernist process of organising information into a cohesive whole.

Putting aside these critical arguments, however, my personal reaction to Eklund’s exhibition was more as an entry point into a way of thinking about practice-led research. I didn’t see it as an exclusive, curated exhibition – for me, it was an accessible pathway into an area of research that I could draw on to form my own research question about how triggers could be used to provoke a viewer into questioning the conventions of communication design. The ‘integration of lived experience, theory, and art-making’ in Pictures Generation art (Iversen 2010, p. 130) was a personal link between design, art and culture that I could use to expand my own ideas about design and design practice. Eklund’s presentation of so many disparate works side-by-side heightened rather than diluted the challenge embedded in each. These challenges to the power of conventional images to display only fixed, authored meanings marked the beginning of my own exploration in the continuing power and relevance of Pictures Generation techniques.

A critical consideration of design can be traced through the history of its practice and it is important to acknowledge that history. Although critical writing on design lacks the depth (and readership) that other fields possess, like architecture or industrial design, (Beirut et al. 1997 & 2002) it is none-the-less important to recognize the positions and practices that form its written history.
The perception that critical and considered writing about design is an unorganized, incoherent assortment of ideas (Beirut et al. 1994) is challenged in Beirut’s Looking Closer series. The series collects together over 200 essays, both historical and contemporary, that represent ‘a discipline with fundamental concerns that include ethics, social responsibility, linguistics…’ (p. xiii Beirut et al. 1994) The essays included are, although at times rough, attempting to find a voice and a critical position in this relatively new field. Design warrants, as do other fields, the scrutiny of debate and opinion.

Tibor Kalman’s writing is represented in the series on several occasions. A discussion about the critical debate on visual culture and the construction of meaning cannot be had without acknowledging his significant and thoughtful contribution. Kalman is a strong advocate for acknowledging the cultural impact of design. In his essay Good History/Bad History he argues that a good history of design isn’t a history of design but rather ideas and therefore a history of culture. “It is a history about how we come to believe what we believe about the world’ (p. 31 Kalman in Bierut et al 1994).

Postmodern design practice of the 1980s and 1990s, of which Kalman formed a significant part, explored whose interests were being served in the construction of meaning through visual culture. Questions were asked about how knowledge, power and authority were shaped through visual language (Drucker & Mc Varish 2013). In their practices, designers like, Tibor Kalman, Bruce Mau and Oliveri Toscani challenged the boundaries of design. 'The role of designers as cultural critiques, sociologists, and provocative agents intensified’ (p. 307 Drucker & Mc Varish 2013). The postmodern sense of criticality in design studios
like Attik and Tomato struggled with the increasing level of complicity that had pervaded design practice of this period (Drucker &McVarish 2013).

The critical positions adopted by these practitioners indicated they saw their work ‘as more culturally significant than the world (or their clients) give them credit for.’ (p. x Beirut et al. 1994). These positions articulate concerns for the effect of images on culture, they seek to explore the seam between visual-culture and meaning making, as the Pictures Generation artists also did. The Pictures generation responded to this challenge and attempted to steal back the critical power of images.

Although there was an increasing level of complicity in the 1980s as early as the 1920s progressive commercial artists viewed the profession as more than ‘a mere service to business, but as a force for social transformation’ (Bierut et al. 1999). This slumbering critical history can be traced back to early periodicals and trade publications (Bierut et al 1999). The continuum of thought, says Bierut, is documented over this period as constantly in flux. Whatever you call it, commercial design, graphic design, visual communication or communication design has long grappled with its role in society.

The essays selected in the Looking Closer series also documents the, at times, alarming view of design as ‘a commercial sales aid’ (p. xii Diggins in Bierut). Herb Lublin and Paul Rand in their essays present an ease with their role within a sales environment. The social responsibility of designers is a persistent concern that resurfaces regularly throughout the history of design writing. Paul Rand saw his social responsibility as assisting to sell products. An interesting (culturally and historically located) pattern forms with William Golden’s argument that what is good for business is good for society. Written in 1959 and
before the information about climate change was available. The idea that, although not widely held, designers’ responsibility lay beyond company profits began to increase in the 1960’s. (Poynor in Bierut et al. 1999). At the other end of the spectrum of concern Rodchenko places constructivist design at the service of revolutionary politics and the transformation of society (Poynor in Bierut et al. 1999).

The intersection between design and culture is also explored and acknowledge in Frascara’s ‘Communication Design’ (2004). Although less radical than Rodchenko, Frascara has risen as an important thought leader in the critical debate on visual culture and meaning-creation. The effect design has on building culture is obvious in a review of our urban environment, he contends. Our visual environment ‘creates cultural models of appearance and behavior, promoting choices, lifestyles, and cultural values’ (p.185 Frasca, 2004). Roles are defined and cultural language is constructed through this display.

Another significant contribution to critical debate that warrants acknowledgement is that of theorist Victor Papanek. He takes the radical, although insightful, position that design had become a system of control. Design had come to be in the service of designers, excluding the user and creating a sense of distance and mystery (Poynor in Bierut 1999). He calls for design to be more participatory. Design needed be connected to everyday life, and to those who used it he argues. In his essay published in the Looking Closer series (1999) it is clear that by his use of the term participatory Papanek meant out of the hands of an elite. Design literature has most often been written for other designers and has not appeared in magazines audiences of design generally read (Bierut 2002). This provocative argument, if nothing else, reveals the limitation in the thinking and articulation amongst designers about design and their
The idea of participatory design raised by people like Papenek, Frascara and The Pictures Generation artists begins a dialogue about who design is for and opens the way for a conversation about the role of the audience in design. The consideration of the user in the construction of culture is a basis on which the Pictures Generation rests. In this respect designs critical history and the Pictures Generation critical position overlap. I became increasingly drawn to the grey border between fine art and communication design. It is the common ground between design, art and culture that I could use to expand my own ideas about design and design practice.

**Practice method**

As a communication designer, seeing Eklund’s 2009 *Pictures Generation* exhibition caused me to question the conventions that I had used intuitively or unconsciously when I designed. I wanted to expand what I understood of design, although prior to the exhibition I found myself stuck within an already established way to think about design and design vocabulary, made up of what I saw as fixed techniques to create visual meaning. The use of communication design in the Pictures Generation exhibition challenged my understanding of design as a profession. The works expanded my ideas about the cultural position of communication design. I left the exhibition eager to explore how communication design both influences and is influenced by the culture in which it sits. On a personal level, I wanted to engage in a more meaningful way with my
own practice. I felt I could use my practice to influence design that is more socially constructive, and that would encompass work with better long-term outcomes not just for my clients, but also for the wider community.

The *Pictures Generation* exhibition provided a method to use design to challenge itself. Becoming inspired by the Pictures Generation artists, I found myself no longer firmly planted in the design world. As my practice-led method developed, I drew from not just the techniques, but also the intellectual framework of this radical group of late 1970s and early 1980s New York-based artists.

It was through this investigative process that the use of ‘triggers’ in communication gained prominence in my research and work. Focusing on my own reaction to the Pictures Generation, I realised that triggers didn’t have to point towards a specific, predetermined action but could rather work simply to challenge the status quo by problematising a viewer’s preconceived ideas. Crucially, the Pictures Generation artists, reacting to the rise of the ‘image culture,’ were asking the same questions of communication design practice that I had long struggled with.

As a communication design professional, I knew that I was not the first designer to seek a working method that freed design from selling, buying, promoting and providing answers. Design activism has a ‘rich history that goes back as long as design itself’ (Design History Society 2011). The concept I was chasing, of the ‘responsible citizen designer,’ can actually be drawn back to the late 19th century Arts and Crafts leader William Morris. Morris, ‘at a time of the origins of professional design culture, asserted that high quality design could serve as a beneficent social force to reform the ills of the industrial age’ (Eskilson
2007, p. 417). However while Morris was focused on the industrial age of the late 19th and early 20th century, the work of the Pictures Generation artists grappled with the postwar emergence of the postmodern ‘image culture’ of today’s world. In their work I saw a direct correlation to the world around us. Pre-dating the Pictures Generation work by more than a decade, Ken Garland’s First Things First design manifesto of 1964 provides clear link between the theory of design activism and the radical design explorations of the Pictures Generation artists.

The Manifesto is a call for communication designers to take action, arguing that:

by far the greatest efforts of those working in the advertising industry are wasted on these trivial purposes, which contribute little or nothing to our national prosperity... we have reached a saturation point at which the high pitched scream of consumer selling is no more than sheer noise. We think that there are other things more worth using our skill and experience on (Garland 1964).

Seeing and later studying the work of the Pictures Generation provided me with a working model to challenge what I had long believed to be the ‘trivial’ impacts of my design work. As a communication designer, I came to the realisation that I was in fact in a privileged position to carry on, build upon and explore the work of the Pictures Generation artists.

As my exhibition pieces developed, I found that what I produced was closely modeled on the works of the Pictures Generation artists. The pieces that had the greatest impact on me at the exhibition, namely Matt Mullican’s ‘Essex’, Barbara Kruger’s ‘Your Gaze Hits the Side of My face’, Sherrie Levine's 'Untitled (Presidents)', Paul McMahon’s ‘Written on Postcards’ (Appendix 3) and Jack Goldstein’s ‘Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’ came through as very clear influences in my practice.
Initially this was disconcerting and even frustrating. I had set out to challenge the conventions of communication design, not reproduce artwork that had been well established and accepted by the art establishment for over thirty years. Although the Pictures Generation artists provided the new reference points and visual language I was seeking the question of how to draw out the probing, challenging and progressive questions of the Pictures Generation artists in the 21st century proved difficult. Eklund’s claim that the Pictures Generation ‘constituted the last movement in art’ (2009b, p. 18) felt like a personal challenge; namely, where to from here? A big part of this challenge is the changed place of Pictures Generation art in our culture. Their popularity has led many Pictures Generation works to become ‘so familiar that they [are]... almost invisible art works and symbols of our visual culture’ (Fowle 2009). In becoming part of the dominant ‘visual culture’, the radical aspect of Pictures Generation art I had been so inspired by has been effectively neutralised and re-appropriated by the culture it challenged. Categorised as ‘iconic’ artworks, Pictures Generation works such as Levine’s ‘Untitled (Presidents)’ and Goldstein’s ‘Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’ have consequently ‘moved from grass roots to haute couture... no longer radical or subcultural but predictably mainstream’ (Atkinson 2012, p. 97). Ironically, approaching the Pictures Generation art as an outsider to the fine-art world allowed the challenge embedded in these works to retain its critical power. Through the making of the exhibition it became clear it was not only their questions, which may date with time, but their radical approach to the use of communication design as a kind of ‘paint’, as Baldassari put it (Eklund, 2009b), to raise questions that makes them relevant still today. For me, coming from a communication design background, the Pictures Generation art spoke to, and in
many ways actively undermined, my own understanding of professional design practice.

While at this early stage I was confident of the challenge posed by Pictures Generation art to my own design practice, my research did not provide me with the practical working model I needed to tease out these implications. Furthermore, my research did not answer my qualms about steering my practice too close to the established techniques of the Pictures Generation artists. The next step in my progress came not through theory, but rather via a disparaging review of a contemporary show in the New York Times. Criticising the exhibition *The Generational: Younger Than Jesus*, art critic Holland Cotter compared the show to an ‘internalized echo of The Pictures Generation,’ where modern artists ‘do with digital images from the Internet what their older colleagues once did with images cut from magazines. The generational parallels are so many as to be worrysome’ (2009). This critique served as a light bulb moment in my own practice. Rather than attempt to artificially update the work of Pictures Generation artists for 21st-century consumption, I began to appreciate how I could harness the ‘out-dated,’ and ‘familiar’ method of the Pictures Generation to reflect upon contemporary image culture. The idea of ‘reclaiming’ and repurposing Pictures Generation art informed a close modelling of iconic pieces. Refusing to hold the ‘authenticity’ of these models sacred allowed me to tap into the liberal atmosphere of Pictures Generation art more effectively. In this process I was drawn back to the use of communication design by Pictures Generation artists such as Mullican, Kruger and Levine. As Saltz notes, ‘appropriation is too nice a word for how potent the [Pictures] style is; stealing and ransacking convey the atmosphere much better’ (2009). Instead of producing work that merely ‘echoed’ Pictures Generation art, this research
provided a model I could use to 'steal' directly from the styling and aesthetics of the iconic works themselves. Below, I discuss six of the ten works in my exhibition. Due to space limitations, I have included the six most representative pieces.

The title of my exhibition, *10 incomplete things from an imaginary life*, epitomises the liberal approach I adopted to questions of authorship and originality. My title draws directly from Matt Mullican's 1973 work 'Essex (Details of an Imaginary Life From Birth to Death)'. Starting with 'Her Birth,' Essex goes through nearly 60 cryptic phrases that capture moments such as 'the pillow on her parents bed' and 'thinking about her son's life,' before closing with 'Her death' (Mullican 1973).

**Figure 5: Mullican, Matt 1973, ‘Essex (Details of an Imaginary Life From Birth to Death)’**

*Image removed due to copyright issues.*

Engagement with the viewer is central to the way ‘Essex’ works. By providing ‘isolated memory images’ (McCollum 1980), Mullican forces viewers to fill in the
gaps of the ‘imaginary’ life from birth to death’. This idea of ‘incompleteness’ as an aid to viewer engagement hit at the core of what I wanted to do in my practice. In contrast to the traditional view of using a communication design to ‘create a bridge between information and understanding,’ (Berman 2009, p. 1) my ‘incomplete’ exhibition removed these bridges. By staging an incomplete exhibition, I announced my conscious refusal to apply the communication tools of my professional practice. By flagging incompleteness in the title, I aimed to problematise viewer’s expectations even before they saw the works themselves. Rather than answers, the works took shape as a means of supplying space for inquiry into an ‘imaginary’ but relatable life. Using everyday objects such as newspapers, a pizza box, a children’s game and a magazine advertisement as the building blocks of this imaginary life, I wanted to highlight the distinction between material, objective reality and the fictional narratives embedded in the creation of meaning (McCullum 1980). While knowledge of Mullican’s work would influence viewer’s perceptions of the originality of my title, these ‘stolen’ everyday objects require only a pre-requisite knowledge of popular culture to lay bare the theoretical underpinnings of the incomplete, uncontrolled, and to an extent unauthored exhibition.

Mullican’s ‘Essex’ inspired not only the title of my exhibition but also provided a model I adopted to create my first work, ‘her list for a fulfilling life’. ‘her list’ features two ‘lists,’ one a torn envelope with the words ‘belief, desire and love’ written on it, and the other a found shopping list of condiments, fruit and vegetables.

**Figure 6: Exhibition work 1 – ‘her list for a fulfilling life’**
The choice to use a discarded envelope was carefully considered. A discarded envelope appears insignificant. It has, apparently, little or no capacity to render significance. The envelope has served its purpose (to deliver a separate message in the form of a letter) and is now finished its use. In this way the envelope could be read as an analogy for a conventional view of communication design, in that it delivers a message and has none in itself. While the envelope itself is empty, its blank space is repurposed as a space for the viewer to inhabit. Where Mullican fills ‘Essex’ with hundreds of word-images, ‘her list’ is dominated by this empty space. In contrast to the crumpled, ordered shopping list it is presented next to, full of tangible, purchasable items, the text of the torn envelope is more complex. Belief, desire and love are deeply personal, subjective and intangible ‘things’.

Like Levine’s ‘Untitled (Presidents)’, this contrast challenges viewers to draw a connection between two apparently unrelated items – between intangible ‘states’ and the daily shopping lists. Do we shop for belief, desire and love in our lives? Does it somehow degrade these states to cast them in the same
space as a shopping list, or even to say that they are things for which we shop? Or does it upgrade the importance of these everyday items to have them placed next to the list of intangible things? Does it highlight the weight of them, the way they ‘make us’, shape our desires and the way we make sense of the world? Like ‘Essex’, the work demands the participant is active in the meaning of the work. Whether the viewer sees an opportunity to unpack Roland Barthes’ suggestion that products operate in consumer culture ‘less as functional objects and more as metaphoric vehicles of collective desire’ (Huppatz 2011, p. 85) is left outside the bounds of authorship. Like Levine’s work, there is no fixed meaning but instead a space provided for viewers to bridge the gap between objects and their ‘meaning’.

While ‘her list’ gently leads the viewer to these questions, I was always attracted to radical and occasionally confrontational ethos of the original Pictures Generation art. Looking at my own working process, I wanted to directly challenge the implicit connection between products and/or services and meaning embedded in the communication design process. This search led to perhaps the most conceptually straightforward exploration of the exhibition, ‘what she found at QV’.

Figure 7: Exhibition work 9 – ‘what she found at QV’
It was the Pictures Generation work of Barbara Kruger, and to a lesser extent Paul McMahon’s ‘Written on Postcards’ (1975) (Appendix 3) that provided the aesthetic and theoretical base for this work. The woman depicted in the advertisement is a representative of ‘dominant culture’s conception of beauty... shaped by Western ideals, including but not limited to, whiteness, tallness, and thinness’ (Dye 2009, p. 114). Devoid of any textual links, the woman, blonde, attractive and expensively clad is implicitly linked to QV shopping mall. Very little is asked of the viewer here outside associating the image and QV. By overlaying the image with the blunt statement ‘this is not me’, ‘what she found’ seeks to immediately ‘break the reality effect’ (Eklund 2009a, p. 69) of the advertisement. This upending of the system by which verification is implicitly applied (Hall 1997) twists the advertisement back onto itself. The text ‘this is not me’ forces the viewer to focus on the form of communication embedded into the image. How do this woman and QV relate and how do I relate
to this image? In asking this question, the symbolic power of the pictured model is subverted. She is no longer a symbol of a shopping precinct, but ‘one of us,’ a human being. Following Kruger’s self-conscious exploration into how woman are positioned and contained through visual language (Yablonsky 2009, p. 108), the voice of the adjusted image breaks through the idealised image of beauty and ‘taste.’ The work challenges viewers to consciously look at their own image through the advertisement’s lens and examine the language by which we express our identity.

In many ways, the direct and confrontational aesthetic of ‘what she found at QV’ separates it from the other nine works of my exhibition. Unlike the more open-ended exploration of, for example, ‘her list for a fulfilling life’, or ‘her own preconceptions and expectations of the possible’, ‘what she found’ features an explicit political agenda addressing the role and positioning of women in communication design. I included ‘what she found’ in my exhibition as a deliberately confrontational piece. It is interesting to note that Eklund himself was criticised for including Kruger in his Pictures Generation exhibition (Metropolitan Museum of Art 2009). Reviewing the exhibition, Schwabsky argued that Kruger cannot be included in the ‘Pictures sensibility’ due to her ‘total control over the interpretation... that seem[s] to address the (often implicitly male) viewer as the antagonist’ (2009, p. 29). Schwabsky’s defensive positioning of the viewer and/or critic addressed by Kruger as ‘implicitly male’ confuses his personal reaction to the work with the ‘trigger’ of the work itself. I called my own appropriation of Kruger’s technique ‘what she found’, to explicitly draw attention to the possibility of a woman as the critic/viewer of the work. I used this model to suggest that modern communication design conventions are
more complicated than male designers presenting idealized visions of women’s bodies (Votolato 1998, p. 177). Indeed, as a female communication designer, I wanted to broaden the discussion beyond just women’s bodies. As Sarah Charlesworth describes, the aim of works like Kruger’s are to interrogate ‘not just how women are positioned through visual language, but how as a culture we organize our relationship to the world’ (Charlesworth in Yablonsky 2009, p. 108). Whether the viewer is male or female, the title ‘what she found’ invites the viewer to adopt a woman’s view. Given the default viewing position identified by Schwabsky is male, this act itself invites the viewer into a ‘female gaze’ as a prescribed method of reading the work.

While in my early work I liberally borrowed from the themes and techniques of Pictures Generation artists like Mullican and Kruger, as my practice developed I began to ‘steal from the everyday’, presenting found objects as design artifacts. This was a surprisingly straightforward development that sprung from a realization that my early practice was based almost exclusively in the visual design media of newspapers (‘her saturday paper’) and print advertisements (‘what she found at QV). These were media that I was both familiar and comfortable designing for from my professional communication design career. While the Pictures Generation exhibition had been enormously inspiring, at this point in my practice, the techniques began to feel constricting. It was in this space that I started to experiment with using ‘found’ objects. This approach drew from the suggestion of theorist Paul Atkinson that, ‘in the postmodern world, where we are aware that so much has already been done before and that it lies around waiting to be picked up, repackaged and represented, being truly unique is now more difficult than ever’ (2012, p. 96). I
gave up any claims to authorship or originality and began a process of literally finding objects, giving them a title and presenting them as design artifacts. The most radical use of this technique was ‘testing her belief in the independence of the material world’, which consisted of a discarded Toto’s pizza box found, hung and presented on the day of the exhibition.

**Figure 8: Exhibition work 5 – ‘testing her belief in the independence of the material world’**

![Pizza Box](image)

The use of a familiar pizza box rejects the idea that ‘the author [or in this case, the designer] is the origin of meaning’ (Eisenhauer 2006, p. 165). ‘testing her belief’ plays with the disjunction between the banality of the pizza box and the suggestion of meaning given by the title and the gallery context. Indeed, along with the title, the gallery context is as much a part of the work as the pizza box. The technique here is similar to the one used by Goldstein in ‘Metro
Goldwyn Mayer’, and as Huppatz (2011) has noted, I was coarsely exposing the designing of meaning, not objects.

The explicit aim of ‘testing her belief in the independence of the material world’ is to trigger viewers to question their relationship with objects from the everyday and, in this process, problematise the conventions of design. The title provokes the viewer to ask what does such a hefty, weighty title have to do with a pizza box? This raises questions about the power and influence of these banal objects. Are they banal just because they are in a bin, discarded, not aesthetically pleasing? Or conversely, just because something is on a wall in a ‘design exhibition’, does this mean the object is somehow ‘worthy’ of deeper consideration? Placing them in the gallery and giving them a title also raises questions about the power of the title and the gallery and of design itself. Reversing the traditional idea of an author as the creator of meaning (see Foucault 1969), the banality of the pizza box places the onus on the viewer to somehow build and create meaning from an object viewed largely as functional rather than aesthetic, more trash than art or design.

Examples of the questioning of design and everyday objects can be found as early as 1915 in Marcel Duchamp’s Readymades. Duchamp was an early instigator of the Dadaist movement, a movement that questioned assumptions about what art actually was and how it was made (Museum of Modern Art 2014). Duchamp gave up a painting career and instead became involved in work that was formed from found everyday objects. “I was interested in ideas—not merely in visual products.” (p.20 Duchamp in Sweeney 1946).

Duchamp, by selecting readily available everyday objects and presenting them as art, was calling into question the artists role as creator of original and handmade
Using triggers in a practice-led research methodology to challenge the conventions of communications design

objects. Duchamp’s Readymades challenged the idea that art must be beautiful. Visual indifference was a provocation employed to highlight the absence of good or bad taste. Using found objects was a way to trigger questions about plagerism and what role the artist had in the creation of the work (Museum of Modern Art 2014).

Readymades, by consciously removing the notion of good taste or original creation posed a challenge to these core qualities that have underpinned the understanding of what defines design also. Drawing on the approach of the Readymades I sought to challenge my assumptions about design, as Duchamp had about art. I adopted this technique to explore how the assumption that designers are defined by original handmade objects, if brought into question, could liberate thinking about what design was and what it could be used for. The Duchampian approach I adopted provoked questions about design, not as a visual product but, as ideas. I was turning the focus of design away from the aesthetic to the ideas they represent, like Duchamp had. I was exploring a way design could be used to raise questions about design itself as Duchamp had raised questions about art.

Pizza boxes are traditionally excluded from a discussion about design because they are is seen as ‘low brow’ design or bad design. However, what is missed in this is the different values that can assess ‘good design’ (Bennett 2012, p. 69–71). While it may not be aesthetically unique, the pizza box is effective if the design focus turns to ‘ease of use and production’. There is a functional reason for the banality of the pizza box. Pizza boxes and other examples of functional design effectively ‘surround us… permeating our existence and establishing the platforms on which we play out our lives’ (Julier 2009). Unlike ‘what she found at QV’ which aims to humanise the symbol, ‘testing her belief’ asks viewers to look beyond the object and focus on the symbolism of a pizza.
box, and the role it has in our everyday reality. The objective here is not merely
to reflect reality but to point to the manufactured nature of the vast majority of
everyday experiences. Like Diane Hanson’s work with hyper-realistic polyester
statues, the pizza box, re-presented and taken out of its context, aims to trigger
what Jameson calls a ‘derealisation of the surrounding world of everyday reality’
(Jameson on Hanson 1991, p. 34). Found as discarded rubbish on the day of the
exhibition, once picked up, titled and hung, the pizza box becomes yet another
‘incomplete’ object from a familiar yet unknowable ‘imaginary life’. It is empty of
pizza and no longer functional – in the gallery it operates as a trigger, prompting
the viewer to question the connections between the works in the exhibition and
the role design plays in building an image of everyday life.

Like the pizza box of ‘testing her belief’, Vegemite toast was used in ‘her
own preconceptions and expectations of the possible’ to trigger the viewer to
question the connection between design, art and the everyday. The most
important difference between the two items was in their creation. The pizza box
was found in an industrial waste bin at RMIT on the day of the exhibition in an
allocated 15-minute bloc before the exhibition. The title was set, and the space
for Work 5 was left empty up until the final hour. In contrast the vegemite toast
was carefully selected both for its symbolic content and its ability to trigger
personal childhood memories. Vegemite is marketed by Kraft as playing ‘a
central role in how Aussies define themselves as an Australian here locally, and
on the world stage’ (Kraft 2011). There is no other spread that has such lofty
claims, nor a more explicit ‘national narrative’ in Australia. In the 2007 election
campaign future Australian PM Kevin Rudd used the spread as a marker of his
‘ordinary Aussie status,’ describing himself as ‘a toast and vegemite sort of guy’
(National Museum of Australia archive). With such rich symbolism, vegemite toast was a logical choice to include in the exhibition to trigger a discussion on the role of communication design in shaping ideas of national and personal selfhood.
Figure 9: Exhibition work 2 – ‘her own preconceptions and expectations of the possible’

My aim when designing ‘her own preconceptions’ was for the work to be read as a marker of identity. For some people attending the exhibition, myself included, the Vegemite toast display draws on the memory of the sensory experience (and bringing this part of the communication experience to the forefront of the inquiry) of meals shared with family and friends. However for others, I recognised Vegemite could be a tangible symbol of exclusion from a white Australian culture. From either perspective I was struck by the farcical irony that a food-product owned by a multinational company could be such an important national symbol. This cultural position occupied by Vegemite testifies to an increasing ‘inability to speak on one's own except through the language
that one has been given’ (Eklund 2009a, p. 57), first suggested in the early Pictures Generation works of Levine and Mullican. The marketing connection between Vegemite and Australian national identity highlights the power of communication design in the contemporary world. Marketing and communication design provide products for consumers to buy, colonising their consciousness in the process (Jameson 1991), giving us a ready-made visual vocabulary we use to interpret our world.

My practice-led approach had shifted from appropriating Pictures Generation forms to re-purposing found objects, and after ‘her own preconceptions’ I became interested in how subverting ideas of technology could contribute to a questioning of communication design practice. My goal was to attempt to make the audience more conscious of the design process by drawing attention to the conventions used. I wanted to draw attention to the active role that communication design professionals play to limit meaning by providing a ‘correct fit between object and message, content and context’ (Winkler 2009, p. 257). The process of highlighting the way meaning-creation works was designed to trigger the audience to be aware of ‘normative constructions of the subject as well as alternative possibilities for understanding the relationship between subjects and visual culture’ (Eisenhauer 2006, p. 166). When I reflected on my own interactions with technology, I was shocked to find this underlying, unquestioning assumption of truth. I used my iPhone to effectively absorb the conventions of pre-constructed, closed systems of meaning. Through the next piece, I attempted to bring the audience’s attention to the connection between image, meaning and what they considered ‘real’. My initial question that preceded the exhibition was: how do we know what is real?
In ‘her ticket to new york’, I displayed an iPhone asking directions to New York with the response ‘Kayak across the Pacific Ocean’ frozen on the screen. The farcical nature of the message immediately points to the constructed, imaginary reality that the device mediates.

**Figure 10: Exhibition work 10 – ‘her ticket to new york’**

![Image of an iPhone displaying instructions]

Figure 10.1: Detail

The ridiculous message works to ‘disrupt or subvert existing systems of power and authority, thereby raising critical awareness of ways of living, working, and consuming’ (Markussen 2013, p. 39). The seamless connection between brand claim, personality and reality is interrupted. The message causes the viewer to question the power of the iPhone’s directions, and the power of technology to construct reality, highlighting the material world the brand seeks to be independent of. The work calls up from within the phone an oppositional message and uses the device (the mechanics) to break the reality effect, turning it back on itself, as Goldstein did with the disjunction between sound and image with ‘Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’. This approach builds on Kruger’s Pictures
Generation work and my own appropriation, ‘what she found at QV’. However, unlike ‘what she found’, this later practice uses humor to counter ideas of high-seriousness and pretension often associated with abstract art (see Best and Kellner 1997, p. 257). It was only at that point, comfortable with presenting art as a designer, that I had the confidence in my practice to celebrate and poke fun at the designs conventions used by brands.

This sense of play carried into the production of what would be my final exploration, ‘her frustration at the refusal of the monkeys to cooperate’. This work consciously draws back to Eklund’s 2009 *Pictures Generation* exhibition. It was the closed cinema loop of Jack Goldstein’s ‘Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’ (1975) that provided the final inspiration. Through my practice-led method, I had become familiar with the enormous creative potential of communication design. Simultaneously, I was forced to acknowledge that the open-ended nature of my project would not lead me to any fixed answers. Instead I had come to appreciate that ‘triggers’ could be used to foster a dynamic, interactive and essentially personal process of meaning-creation. Goldstein’s endlessly looped lion logo, hijacking the iconic MGM lion’s roar and showing it as a ‘cheap illusion’ (Eklund 2009a, p. 67), was close to my own approach. Using a similarly jerky video loop, ‘her frustration’ shows a child unsuccessfully attempting to hook a series of plastic monkeys together. It is the overlay of the viewer’s own emotional state that is on display and the frustration is not resolved but heightened by the repetition. The work was an attempt to draw on the viewer’s own emotions in making meaning but also the illusion of technology to resolve anything in itself. This confounds the idea that technology can do something for you, and exposes its limitations.
Initially a scene of the familiar and banal, the endless repetition of the video isolates and heightens the child’s frustration. The emotive nature of the work invites the viewer to recall experiences of frustration and project these onto the ‘incomplete work’ displayed. The work seeks to highlight repetition as a basic convention of communication design. The loop mirrors the same feeling of professional entrapment within ‘a closed cycle of design education…’ [replicating] the most common design practice’ (Winkler 2009, p. 253) that sparked my research. The title implies that it is the monkeys that are responsible for the child’s frustration, which undermines technology’s claim to represent of a normative reality. Like Goldstein’s repeating lion roar, in ‘her frustration’ and ‘her ticket to new york’ the viewer is effectively trapped ‘within the forms of
mechanical reproduction that [give] power’ (Eklund 2009a, p. 67). These forms of mechanical reproduction provide the visual language of design and create an ‘imaginary life’ out of disparate design artefacts. The exhibition does not provide a ‘correct fit’. The connection between the works in the exhibition is one of distance and remove, which seeks to draw attention to the conventions of communication design by allowing the viewer to step outside their everyday context. The sense of entrapment itself acts as a trigger. This entrapment is an unconscious positioning of both the designer and the audience. In conventional design, there is only one possibility, only one way to make the image, one way to read it, interact with it. It is a tool kit with one tool. The exhibition works attempted to provoke the viewer to step out of this position and explore the different interpretations possible, and to become conscious of the illusion of this fixed positioning and technologies manufacturing of normative reality.

True to the ethos that shaped my practice, the ten items that make up 10 incomplete things from an imaginary life were arranged to challenge ideas of authorship and meaning in communication design. The narrative of creation described in this essay was abandoned on the day of the exhibition. The creative process that developed over the course of my research was important to my own method, but I did not believe it should shape the viewer’s interactions with the items. Like McMahon’s ‘Colored Dollar Bills’ (1973–77), what I aimed to present was ‘a deadpan derailing of narrative coherence and nonsensical tableaux... that undercut the viewer’s deep-seated belief in the truth of the [designed] image’ (Eklund 2009a, p. 64). The lack of obvious connection between the disparate items forced participants to create their own unique story of the ‘imaginary life.’ ‘What do these disparate objects have to do with each other?’ a participant
commented, ‘they make me ponder what is the meaning of all these ephemeral objects that surround us, that give our life meaning.’ The gallery presentation of this ‘design exhibition’ aimed to use the communication design subversions pioneered by the original Pictures Generation artists to blur the line between design and fine art, and between object/image and meaning, exposing the bridge between information and understanding.
Conclusion

Over the course of my practice-led method, the focus of research shifted several times, but exploration of how the radical art of the Pictures Generation artists could shape and transform communication design practice remained the same. The process of creating the artworks and writing this exegesis progressively narrowed the focus. Like the artistic experimentation of the practice stage which shifted from re-appropriating old communication design to found objects and later ‘new media’, this narrowing of focus constituted a journey that shaped the final piece of work on every level. It also served to bring the limitations of my practice-led process into focus. Ultimately, my original aim of using the techniques of the Pictures Generation artists to provide a path to achieve greater social awareness and sustainable design practices proved to be beyond the scope of this project. True to the ethos of practice-led research, what I found was that instead of the foundation for new design conventions, the thesis became a personal exploration of my own design practice. It became less about moving away from design than providing a framework I could use to dig beneath the surface of communication design and examine how it works. In this process, the practice-method led to a re-engagement with the design process and the design audience. The final exploration is not about ideals of ‘good design’ and design sustainability, but these concepts still play a role in the work. The exegesis exists not to stand alone, but to remind me of the possibility of deeper engagement in my design practice.
The project saw a transition in my practice from producing ‘good design’ to ‘incomplete design’. Central to this was my realisation that for an audience to be truly engaged, meaning cannot lie simply ‘within’ a design artifact. This meant that my original intention of providing noble narratives of sustainability and responsible design had to be abandoned. This was a difficult, but ultimately productive transition. Entering into the research project, I had come to the point in my professional career where I viewed communication design and sustainability as diametrically opposed. My conception of communication design was intrinsically linked to what I saw as damaging 20th century notions of nature as limitless and something to be tamed (Suzuki 1997, Thackara 2005). In this world, the communication designer’s role was simply to perpetuate and occasionally disguise an essentially destructive culture of consumption (Jackson 2009). From this mindset I viewed Eklund’s Pictures Generation exhibition as something from outside the world of design, an external source that could provide a working model for the contemporary designer. Yet the idea of producing ‘good’ design increasingly clashed against the lessons I had drawn from the Pictures Generation work. By focusing from the outset on my desired objective of producing ‘good design’ I had fallen into the trap described by design theorist Guy Julier as ‘erroneously separate[ing] the viewer (the audience) and the viewed (design work)’ (Julier 2006). This separation negates the role of the viewer, placing the design audience in a largely passive role of consuming or at most decoding a pre-packaged meaning.

While my work fostered my own reengagement with communication design, several weaknesses with using an exhibition-based approach to practice-led research emerged. Following Julier (2006) I designed each item with a flaw
or a gap to be filled in by the audience. This allowed for a wide array of meaning-making but did not enter the realm of truly design that embraces the co-creation of meaning. The works were ‘incomplete’ but the structure remained guided by my own interests as the creator, and on a structural level the audience was unable to contribute on an equal level as co-creators (Schuler & Namioka 1993). Another risk of providing open-ended incomplete triggers was that it allowed viewers to simply validate rather than challenge their own conceptions of the world. Looking back on 10 incomplete things from an imaginary life, this pitfall could have been avoided by encouraging easy ways for the viewer to interact with the works. These interactions could have been written or recorded, and then supplied to new viewers, and thus would have undermined the possibility of allocating fixed meaning to any of the works. Another possibility could have been to use the titles of the pieces to provide more direct meanings for the pieces.

While criticised by Pictures Generation theorists for her blunt and confrontational approach (see Schwabsky 2009) Barbara Kruger employs this technique to great effect by directly addressing an imagined audience in works such as ‘Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face’ (1981). While I used Kruger’s aesthetic in ‘what she found at QV’, I did not continue this practice, believing that crowding the exhibition with Kruger-esq works would risk diluting the communicate power of ‘what she found’, and turn viewers away with an obvious political agenda.

The original intention of my research was to foster a deeper community engagement with practices of communication design. I felt that if people were better equipped with critical tools to engage with the images that surround them, they could then apply these tools to focus on the need to build a more
sustainable future (Hopkins 2011). By providing design that was fundamentally incomplete, I could draw attention to the artificial connection imposed between objects and a socially constructed reality. However, supplying the link between how individuals processed the design artifacts in the exhibition and how this could be applied to the everyday was ultimately beyond what I could achieve within the scope of this project. As a result the practice-based research and exhibition are personal explorations of the design process – in the end, the challenge was to me as a designer. The tangible results of the exhibition and the practice-led research are not in the community or the audience reactions to my exhibition, but in how the process changed my own design practices.

Embracing such a personal research methodology helped to take the focus away from ‘design results’ and put it on the intellectual framework that feeds the design process. This moves the conversation about sustainable design away from discussions of materials and message, and onto the underlying ideas of design culture and the frameworks that create received ideas about design norms. The research process helped me reimagine the role of both the designer and design audience, drawing from Eisenhauer’s argument that ‘re-thinking critical practice cannot be explored without simultaneous enquiry into the normative constructions of the subject’ (2006, p. 166). This kind of exploration is an underdeveloped area in sustainable design research. Notably, in the seminal 2009 post, 101 things designers can do to save the earth (School of Visual Concepts Seattle), all 23 web-links focus on the materials that communication designers use. None of the links reference a wider consideration of the conceptual framework of communication design practice. The post does not engage with the culture of consumption and its unsustainable demand for
resources (Jackson 2009) and the social effects of communication design, despite the fact it claims to, ‘set the national agenda for the role of design in economic, social, political, cultural and creative contexts’ (School of Visual Concepts Seattle 2009). What this example shows is that concepts of sustainable communication design practice are largely undeveloped, beyond minimising the environmental impact of communication design within a commercial context – for example, by using paper from a sustainable source, using soya-based inks, minimising the practice’s energy use and avoiding working for clients with environmentally unsound practices. Although these considerations are important, their scope is not broad enough to address or halt the damage being done to the world’s ecosystems (United Nations 2011, Jackson 2009). This approach fails to harness the full potential of communication designers to create social change through critical engagement with design practice.

After producing, researching and staging *10 incomplete things from an imaginary life*, I had an uneasy transition back into commercial communication design work. While my research hadn’t provided me with a clear model for sustainable design, it had caused me to examine my existing working methods. Attempting to return to old habits felt both restrictive and dishonest, displaying a particular set of values I no longer felt comfortable with. My previous design practice had assumed a passive designer and audience. From the outset I had designed for clients, not the community. The audience was simply the end point for the key message of a particular brand or stakeholder. I had to abandon my established working process to find a way to design that productively used my research. While my view on the potential of design had shifted radically, I still identified as a designer first and foremost. I was keen to re-engage with my
practice, but I now viewed my audience as a collection of individuals to engage with. As a designer, my challenge was to begin something, not to complete it. ‘Incomplete design’ is empowering. It allows for the contributions of other voices and perspectives, and makes space for interactive, even transformative design.

As an example of how my practice has changed as a result of my research methodology, I am currently engaged in the branding and launch of my own project, the Melbourne School of Design (MSD). This project shows how my ideas about the design process and the role of the designer have changed. The key item of this design work is the MSD website (www.melbourneschoolofdesign.com.au).

**Figure 12: Melbourne School of Design homepage**

The website is overlayed with a series of shifting images of Melbourne. The images are used to create an open-ended system with dynamic and meaningful
opportunities for participants to engage in the meaning-creation process. Using the ‘incomplete aesthetic’ of the 10 incomplete things exhibition, the MSD website works to encourage interaction. For example, viewers are invited to post visual ideas they find interesting under the ‘stuff you like’ tab. This process allows users to generate website content and actively shape the brand in real-time. Through this process, the MSD website acts as a trigger, starting and providing a space for conversation with past, present and potential students. Instead of a fixed message, the website provides an interactive space to explore design.

While interactivity and an unoccupied space is central, to provide the necessary prompts to engagement, the MSD website also required active design skills on my part. From the ground up, my engagement with this design process was more open, less fixed and formulaic. The very basis of the MSD brand was defined as change rather than say for example design expertise. The courses on offer aim to promote and provoke change in how both established and budding designers think about and execute their practice. This position in itself was a result of my research and my change in perspective. The visual element of boats, sails, oceans, a journey, albatrosses, maps, stars, wind, and owls were explored as spaces for this idea. The aspect of darkness/night (represented by black) and wind and stars also drew on the dreamlike quality of imagination and the unconscious as an important part of the design process. Ultimately it was the connection between design and culture, which the research had explored, that provided the key element. The ever-shifting nature of culture meant that MSD could not be ‘branded’ in any fixed manner. Instead a range of design elements were applied, under an evocative night sky, to act not just as visual communication but visual conversation.
This exegesis has provided me the opportunity to reflect and explore the way my research has changed my design practice. Starting from my position as a designer who unconsciously adopted and used the conventions of communication design in my work, the Pictures Generation exhibition awakened me to other possibilities. I set about using the techniques of the Pictures Generation artists in my exhibition in order to challenge my ideas about communication design. Like Goldstein who did not alter the 51-year-old MGM logo for his work, I unashamedly stole existing objects and reframed them in an exhibition context to open myself to new possibilities. Through using these techniques, I became aware that rather than designing objects, I was part of the cultural process of making meaning, and that design affected the way we saw ourselves and the world. I was using visual language to engage in a two-way conversation that increased my awareness of the brand values that were operating through the objects of design.

The practice-led research methodology I employed for the exhibition helped me to engage with my own design process in a more open, less fixed and formulaic way. I was more conscious of the effect of my work, and how it was positioned. I found myself deeply questioning the underlying values I was employing when designing. I started considering the role of the designer as less a vehicle for a fixed message, and more as an instigator to start a conversation. Through the practice-led research, I had discovered that a work could be ‘incomplete’, and that this was ok – in fact, it opened up possibilities and allowed for the contribution of other voices.
'Incomplete’ work meant there was room to explore different perspectives, rather than being confined within a fixed visual language built on design conventions that are more often used to exploit a market rather than foster community. Despite the challenges, I think the practice-led research has sharpened my awareness of my own design practice, and it has made me determined to ensure I remain open to new possibilities. The legacy of the Pictures Generation artists is a strong reminder of the need in contemporary image culture to leave space for the viewer within the visual language of communication design.

The Pictures Generation artists changed the points of artistic reference and aesthetics for their work. My approach was to bring this same intent to my theoretical understanding of the practice in order reframe my conception of communication design. The works heighten my awareness of the capacity of design to raise questions through radical innovation, these questions reflecting on the conventions of communication design. Rather than the conventional use of design, which puts the viewer at arms length, dulling their critical engagement, I wanted to use the tactics and strategies of the Pictures Generation artists in my own practice to sharpen critical reflectivity. Like Kruger’s work, I attempted to position the works so that they pointed back at the viewer, providing an opportunity to the viewer to critically assess the design work and the conventions of communication design that are so often unconsciously accepted by the communication designer.
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APPENDIX 1

Exhibition work 3 – her saturday paper with ‘girl I love you’ by massive attack highlighted (and detail below)
Using triggers in a practice-led research methodology to challenge the conventions of communications design

Exhibition work 4 – when the world was in her head
Using triggers in a practice-led research methodology to challenge the conventions of communications design

Exhibition work 6 – her iphone
Exhibition work 8 – her puzzle from the royal melbourne show
APPENDIX 2

Exhibition works list (as it appeared in the exhibition)

1. Incomplete things from an imaginary life
   1. her list for a fulfilling life
   2. her own preconceptions and expectations of the possible
   3. her Saturday paper with ‘girl I love you’ by massive attack highlighted
   4. when the world was in her head
   5. her belief in the independence of the material world
   6. her phone
   7. her frustration at the refusal of the monkeys to co-operate
   8. her eliding number puzzle from the royal melbourne show
   9. what she bought at QV
10. her ticket to new york
APPENDIX 3

‘Written-on Postcards’ 1975 Paul McMahon

*Image removed due to copyright issues.*
Using triggers in a practice-led research methodology to challenge the conventions of communications design