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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of designers are reflecting critically on the nature of the profession and their place within it by conceptualising graphic design as a form of practice-based research. The model of the ‘practitioner-researcher’ is seeing the self-conscious designer forming a more critical disposition in relation to her discipline. Captured in scholarly work, but also often in more open and less prescriptive environments (online forums, Readers, catalogue essays, interviews, independent press publications, etc.), critical exchanges from the community of practice and practitioner-produced writing and theory offer an alternative to the model of the outside critic looking in. This paper discusses the nature and form of this discourse and considers its potentially overlooked contribution to a developing criticism for graphic design.

Key Words: Graphic design writing, practitioner-researcher, practice-based research, critical graphic design, design critique.

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FULL PAPER

**Introduction**

“Design has its own distinct things to know, ways of knowing them, and ways of finding out about them” (Nigel Cross, 1982).

Positioning graphic design as a form of research opens it up to empirical and philosophical forms of inquiry. Motivated by a critically reflective approach to their work, there is an increasing trend for graphic designers to become involved in this kind of activity - asking questions of what they do and becoming active researchers of their own discipline. Graphic design is a deeply reflexive process whose practice can be considered its own research, and whose inquiry motivates its further practice. Conducting research through design (Frayling, 1993) practitioner-researchers are using the practice of designing as a research method for investigating how designers design, for investigating the nature of design, and for critically examining a wide range of contextual issues.

These practitioner-researchers are contributing in a range of ways to knowledge about graphic designs’ products and its activities. The following discusses the nature and form of this critically reflective work by designers and explores the varied forms and locations of writing that is capturing practitioners’ thinking with regard to this part of their practice. It is suggested that a less prescriptive, alternative form of critical exchange is taking place via reports and reflections by practitioner-researchers and that this represents a rich source of content

for the advancing criticism of graphic design.

Practitioners working in what can be described as more experimental and open-ended ways within the context of graphic design are increasingly describing what they do as research, inquiry, and simply ‘work’. Active in an expanded field, and working on non-client projects in addition to paid work, graphic designers, motivated by more speculative and experimental projects, talk about their practice as designers, rather than simply talking about end products. They are extending the traditional role of the designer by engaging graphic design as medium of critical and reflective inquiry. Self-generated, research-based projects are integrated into their daily work and are seen as an important part of their professional development. These projects utilise the potential of graphic design as medium to explore issues, to critique, to develop new theories, to offer new insights on design praxis, and to question fundamentals of the discipline. Often working between art and design these research investigations engage designers in a problem-finding mode, turning the tables on the traditional notion of graphic designers as problem solvers.

### **The practitioner-researcher**

The nature and purpose of research in art and design has been widely debated. Durling (2002) points out that the term ‘research’ means different things to different people. He has noted that: “for some it indicates investigation, for others it indicates practice. For some it refers to objective findings, for others it refers to subjective opinion” (Durling, 2002). The continued lack of clarity around a definition of graphic design and graphic design research has also been seen as an advantage in allowing practitioners’ own experience to influence future directions and perspectives on the relationship between practice and research (see Banham, 2007 & Buchannan, 2004).

The term ‘practitioner-researcher’ has been applied to academics and professional practitioners who share a research-orientation to graphic design. Design writer Stephen Banham’s (2007) notion of a ‘hybrid practitioner/researcher’ is a designer who is “both at ease with the ever changing demands of commercial practice as well as being engaged on a critical, academic and even philosophical level” (Banham, 2007:2). Driven by a revived sense of agency, or sometimes a professional requirement to engage in research activity, the practitioner-researcher model is becoming an increasingly common model for graphic designers to practice under.

One notable example of a group interested in the possibilities of graphic design as research is Amsterdam design studio ‘Metahaven’ who describe themselves as “designers and researchers” (Kyes & Owens, 2007:82). They use design as a medium of inquiry. Both their commissioned and self-directed work reflects a concern with political and social issues. They engage in client based work, research, and writing which may be exhibited, printed or experienced online. Using traditional scientific research rhetoric Metahaven talk of their studio as a ‘think tank’ where assignments often result from ‘case studies’ and are concerned with answering questions or investigative work. Metahaven say that by ‘research’ they intend: “a gathering of data, inquiry, imagination, and,

ultimately, speculation, which informs their work in graphic design, branding, and iconography, as well as in architecture” (Metahaven, 2008). In a published interview by *The Reader* (a book about critical design practice that is part of *The Iaspis Forum on Design and Critical Practice* initiated in Stockholm), the group describe their motivation to extend on traditional ways of operating as graphic designers: “We started because we wanted to create a more informed method for design, to create a space for speculative thinking, and to combine this with the visual output one expects of a design practice” (Ericson, et al. 2009:241).

Figure 1: Essay ‘Models for the Political’ by Metahaven in *Forms of Inquiry: The Architecture of Critical Graphic Design*.



Another widely regarded practitioner-researcher is British/Australian designer James Goggin. Goggin has continued to work on both client and self-initiated projects often categorising his work under the heading ‘research’. For example, his ongoing project titled ‘Pop Culture Colour Theory’ is described as a research project that explores humankind’s attempts at codifying and commodifying colour. He frequently talks of a ‘critical engagement with context’ when describing his approach. A critical eye on the systems and processes in which graphic design operates drive his practice-based research explorations. Goggin is interested in the potential of graphic design to utilise these systems in critical ways (Ericson, et al. 2009:35).

Conceptualising graphic design as a form of practice-based research opens up new possibilities and new skills for the practice of design. Noble and Bestley (2005) introduce the idea that work done under the guise of experimental or explorative graphic design has opened the way for research methodologies to become a more active part of a designers’ repertoire:

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

Long time commentator on the development of design research

Professor Richard Buchanan identifies one form of design inquiry as ‘the nature of design’ saying it is tasked to: “seek to understand not simply what and how but why design and its products and activities are as they are” (Buchanan, 2004:12).

These kind of questions probe at an empirical and philosophical level, inviting designers to reflect on their practice, rethink their profession, and to develop their own epistemological and methodological approaches to research in their field. A widely accepted understanding of the nature of knowledge in art and design, and the methods and conventions of its research is yet to be achieved. Academia is currently working through the complexities of interpreting art and design as research. With an increasing interest by practicing designers to ask these kinds of questions of their practice and engage in research activity, they are becoming more involved in these ongoing academic debates.

For example, Australian practitioner-researcher Lisa Grocott investigates the dichotomy established between client projects and experimental research asking why the speculative-driven nature of performative [practice-based] research can’t have as much agency within the academy as the evidence-driven culture of quantitative research? (Grocott, 2006). At a time when widespread agreement on the details of what constitutes research in art and design does not exist, practitioner-researchers have a unique historical opportunity to inform developing standards and contribute to critical debate on the issues surrounding design as research. Through her practice-based research studies she has taken on the very question of the relationship between speculative research and commercial activities, seeking to ‘naturalise’ the link between the two. The results of Grocotts’ research, disseminated across a number of published formats, contribute to our greater understanding of the design process and to design thinking. Specifically, how a critical space for speculation can play a significant role in creating a practice model that allows designers to avoid familiar, derivative work and embrace the unfamiliar (Grocott, 2006:1).

Stephen Banham (2007) raises the issue of the perceived lack of financial benefit to industry of this kind of design research asking that this be called into question. Banham says: “Why can’t a critical reflection on practice (practice-led research) be seen as offering favourable economic outcomes as well as research outcomes?” (2007:2). Grocotts’ research also offers insight here. She reports that being simultaneously active in studio-initiated research and client commissioned projects had a positive impact in business terms: “It was clear that the timesheet hours we committed to the studio-initiated projects not only generated a playful body of work that aesthetically and conceptually influenced our client projects, but that they also advanced our client relationships” (Grocott, 2006:12).

### **Open frameworks for criticism**

While discussion continues on how the visual outcomes of practice-based research themselves contain or reflect knowledge, the written word prevails as the most established means for communicating critical thought. Writing report-style scholarly papers is not the best fit for

every practitioner-researcher, nor do many have an interest in making a contribution in this context. The established forms of argument and critical rhetoric of the scholarly paper can seem like an uneasy place for commentary on a more personal, experiential level. Less formal, but genuinely reflective writing can hold equally important critical insights.

Reflecting on an apparent lack of a relevant critical discourse in design and introducing her co-authored book “In Case of Design–Inject Critical Thinking’ Jeppsson (2010) argues for an alternative way of developing a language for critical writing on graphic design. This is based on a more discursive approach, one that is open and interactive, inviting thoughts and ideas that develop original texts allowing a critical language to slowly develop. Jeppsson says of this approach that: “An open and inviting language may therefore hold fragments of philosophical elaborations, personal and emotive evaluations, ideological reflections and humour as well as provocation... where the writer is allowed space to interpret, analyse and discuss – rather than report” (Jeppsson, 2010).

With designers taking an increasingly reflective approach to their practice, and with an increasing number becoming involved in practitioner-research, the call for an alternative to standard academic forms of critique for advancing a critical language comes at a good time. An alternative kind of commentary that relies less on a body of existing theory or established structure and more on a discursive, personally reflective model as Jeppsson suggests seems a good fit for the ephemeral, everyday nature of graphic design and its sites of commentary which range from the informal blog to the critical magazine article.

Via the published interview, the catalogue essay, the position statement, or the reflective self-report, designers offer original writing that reveals the values, philosophies and ideologies that inform their practice. This represents one form of contribution to critique and knowledge in the subject. Here you find designers critically considering the foundations, limits and very definition of graphic design and the nature of their practice as designers. For example, in a catalogue essay accompanying the exhibition ‘Graphic Design and The White Cube’ graphic designer/researcher Stuart Bailey is quoted as offering the following view on the location of the subject of graphic design: “... graphic design only exists when other subjects exist first. It isn’t an a priori discipline, but a ghost; both a grey area and a meeting point...” (Bailey, 2006). Critical thinking in graphic design has often turned to the fundamental question of a definition for graphic design. The contributions of practitioner-researchers on this topic are vital to a critique that remains relevant to a professional field.

Bailey works as a writer, editor and a graphic designer actively involved in researching new models for publishing and distributing books. As a practitioner-researcher Bailey has contributed to the critique of graphic design through a number of ‘smaller’ forums most notably via Dot Dot Dot journal (now out of production, but continued by a new publication: Bulletins of The Serving Library). Bailey calls attention to an idea that many designers struggle with - the way that they refer to their activity in their field transcends the established notion of its definition. He notes that designers represented in the exhibition Graphic Design in the White Cube move fluently between the worlds of art, design, music,

theatre and writing and adds: “I and everyone I work with just think of what we do as merely “work”. I studied typography and graphic design—that’s my background and it informs what I do—but now I do a variety of work, which may or may not come under those headings’ (Bailey, 2006).

Other topics of critical interest in graphic design have been the potential relationship between relational aesthetics and graphic design and the long-standing question of the relationship of art to design. As well as articles in more official, critical forums (such as *Eye Magazine*) smaller publications have captured discussion and analysis on these themes by practitioner-researchers. In a conversation published by *The Reader* practitioners James Goggin (Practice) and Mia Frostner, Robert Sollis, Paul Tisdell & Rasmus Troelsen (Europa) discuss the application of the term relational aesthetics to graphic design, as well the relationship of design to art, producing an insightful piece of writing. This text offers a take on these topics of critical debate that draw on reflections of practice as well as offering accounts of personal positions and philosophies.

Figure 2: Interview with Practice & Europa in *THE READER*, Iaspis Forum on Design and Critical Practice.



Online forums and independent, small press publications have continued to supply graphic design with an alternative critical voice, capturing views from a wide perspective. Numerous art, design and visual culture magazines past and present such as *Émigré* (USA), *Dot Dot Dot* (NL), *Cabinet* (USA), *2wice* (USA), *Elephant* (NL), *The National Grid* (NZ), *Design Philosophy Papers* (AU), *Design Observer* (USA), *e-flux* (USA) have published the voice of the graphic design practitioner/researcher. These venues support a variety of contribution types from causal comment to more scholarly styles of writing. They easily represent the kind of alternative, discursive, open and interactive forum that Jeppsson (2010) argues is required for a critical language to develop slowly in graphic design, allowing it to find its own means of critique and develop its own subject rhetoric.

Design critic/researcher Kenneth FitzGerald says he found a place for writing in his postgraduate study years in *Émigré* magazine, which he describes as a “unique forum that fostered an expansive and challenging

view of graphic design” (FitzGerald, 2010:11). The journal *Dot Dot Dot* (previously mentioned) was a small, independent publication from the Netherlands edited by Peter Bilak and Stuart Bailey, and is described by FitzGerald as providing an avenue where “design writing can be eclectic, thoughtful and imaginative...the journal proves there’s plenty of unexplored territory for design investigations and the forms they may take” (FitzGerald, 2010:89). Design critic Rick Poynor has also praised *Dot Dot Dot* noting “its unpredictability and intelligence, its enthusiasm for pointing a flashlight into corners of culture that tend to be overlooked, makes it one of our more valuable design publications” (Poynor, 2005).

In her studies of the history of design, Teal Triggs (2009) has similarly commended small press and self-published magazines by graphic designers that sit outside traditional academic and historiographic practice, as providing “some of the most interesting criticism, plus new ways of conceiving of the visual and written documentation of graphic design” (2009:325). Triggs explores how ‘little magazines’ have had an impact on the positioning and documenting of graphic design within theoretical and historical frameworks, arguing that “self-produced design publications provide valuable insights into the theoretical and visual concerns that enrich our understanding of the history of the profession, graphic artifacts and their cultural contexts” (2009:339). As an alternative form of knowledge production operating on the margins little magazines have captured the here and now, have focused on the everyday, and have supplied a venue for the practitioner voice. Texts from these smaller sources, exempt from the systems and conventions of academic writing and accompanied by visual content, are often more pertinent and relevant for their open, untested and more radical flavour.

Looking to other fields of criticism for models of a more free-ranging and open-ended approach to critique in our own subject can also prove very productive. The unsystematic nature of essayist Susan Sontag, who often looked to personal experience and response in her critique of culture, representing a departure from the standard methods of her structuralist and post-structuralist contemporaries (Kennedy, 1990) provides one example. Sontag was a long-suffering cancer patient herself when she wrote ‘*Illness as Metaphor*’ and drew on her own experience in her critique of the metaphors and myths surrounding illness. Cultural critic John Berger, whose writing defies conventional boundaries, mixing the genres of criticism, autobiography, poetry and diary entries provides another example; Berger’s poignant critique of art and life, and of the operations of the human world deal in experience. He speaks both of and to ordinary experience, using self-reflection as a tool to understand lived experience.

Writers like these offer a model of critique that is often quite personal, open and conversational in approach echoing the flavor of existing practitioner-produced critique in graphic design. These models demonstrate how alternative approaches to standard forms of critique are always possible and how you can always show people things in new ways. A critical discourse for graphic design needs to consider the many and varied forms of criticism and approaches to critical writing that exist



in other fields as a way of progressing its own unique forms.

### Conclusion

Designers who have adopted a research-orientation to their practice and who are regularly involved in experimental, self-directed and speculative project work seem to have in common a critically reflective approach to their practice. They regularly ask interrogative questions of their discipline contributing to critical thought and discussion on a range of topics including: conceptualising graphic design as research; the relationship between speculative projects and commercial work; critically engaging with aspects of the social, cultural and economic context of graphic design; expanding the definition of what a graphic designer is/does.

Some of these practitioner-researchers are communicating their ideas through scholarly means. But more often, their experiential knowledge and critical, personal, reflective voice appears in a variety of smaller forums where an alternative kind of language is possible. Helping to sustain a vibrant and relevant culture of critical writing for graphic design the contribution of the practitioner-researcher regularly features in smaller press publications that support a more flexible form of contribution to the ‘test and report’ style format of many academic publications. The nature of graphic design as a young, interdisciplinary field connected to the everyday means it can escape the more sterile academic forms of rhetoric found in many other fields and find a more balanced and meaningful form of critical discourse, where a wide responsibility for critical writing is achieved.

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