Curating and Writing Beyond Academia

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It's[1] a somewhat whimsical title, I admit. It reflects not only my mixed feelings about my time in academia (whatever writing a PhD may have been, it was not wild), but also my ambivalent attitude toward my lack of a fixed discipline since I completed my academic studies twenty years ago. The invitation to write this contribution served as a prompt to consider as a whole the research and writing I have done since finishing my PhD. In particular, it caused me to think about the relationship between the methods I followed in an academic context and the way I have worked since.

Expanding on my own experience, I draft some questions about the business of researching, writing and publishing in a broader sense. They are far from complete – studying the different forms of these activities could be several PhD subjects in itself – but they are the ones that have concerned me over the last couple of decades.

Starting out: How do you define a subject in academia, as against a topic in journalism or essay writing? What qualities does an academic subject need have? How do academic questions and journalists' enquiries differ?

Undertaking research: How do you go about gathering information and what kinds of information should you gather? How do you order your sources, and is the hierarchy of sources different within academia? How do you balance primary and secondary information? Is printed information always more worthwhile than digital? And, in the case of art and design histo-

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1 »Beyond Academia: writing and curating in the wild« – a reflection on a lecture given to the students of the Graduate School of the Arts program run jointly by Bern's University and its University of the Arts on the 4th April 2019.

ry, how do you weigh your own encounters with objects and images against existing analysis?

Writing it up: How do you give shape to the information you have gathered? What makes an academic argument and what amounts to journalistic story?

In writing texts, I have the sense that the demands of language determine the course of my argument. More than that, it is only once I start writing that I truly understand what I think. For me, that is the most worthwhile aspect of writing. Within the broader category of writing, academic writing, writing that must be anchored to footnotes, creates a specific line of thought. Working for magazines or writing catalogues essays, you can leave gaps for your readers to fill in as they choose, you can enjoy ambiguity, but that isn't an option in an MA or PhD thesis.

And, last: How do you present information to an audience? Is a refereed journal full of footnotes necessarily superior to a magazine, either as an outlet for a writer, or a means to understand the world? Is a hardback academic book that costs a fortune better than a website that subsequent researchers can access for free from anywhere (you can sense my own bias in the way I phrase that question)?

There was a cartoon in a recent issue of the *New Yorker* in which one character suggests to another that if they want to keep some information thoroughly secret, if they want to put somewhere it will remain utterly undetected, then the best place would be within the text of an art catalogue essay. I've killed the joke in the retelling, but I found it both funny and sad. Oftentimes in my field of design writing I find myself writing for a tiny audience. In the case of the said catalogue, you are quite likely to be addressing only the practitioner, and, in the case of an academic text, your audience might well be solely your examiners. In every instance, I write in a way I feel I will engage the broadest possible audience. I believe that is a useful fiction.

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After raising these questions, I go on to review a few projects with those enquiries in mind. I started back in 1993, when I submitted an MA thesis for the History of Design Course run jointly by London's Victoria and Albert Museum and Royal College of Art on the subject of film title sequences. Looking

at the years 1955 to 1969, my enquiry had nostalgic overtones. I loved the title sequences of Hitchcock's 1950s films and wondered why such graphically considered titles had become a rarity. To make the subject manageable, I edited down my subject to five films, three with titles designed by Saul Bass (the graphic designer of the Hitchcock sequences) and one each by the graphic designer Robert Brownjohn and the animator Richard Williams.

Once my research was underway, nostalgia gave way to a fledgling hypothesis regarding the adoption of the tropes of early modern experimental film making by mainstream US cinema. This was a consequence of the influx of European emigres in the 1930s and 40s. In the case of Robert Brownjohn, there was a direct link. Studying with László Moholy-Nagy in Chicago in the 1940s, Brownjohn borrowed Moholy Nagy's ideas of projecting light onto moving surfaces for the title sequence of the 1963 James Bond film *From Russia with Love*. While Moholy Nagy imagined beaming images onto clouds, Brownjohn used a belly dancer as his mobile screen.

These days it is possible to see clips from just about every film, be it a 1920s experimental short or a mainstream 1960s production, online. Back in the early 1990s, however, it was quite a challenge to access this material. I spent several days at the British Film Institute winding film stock onto Steenbecks. While the experience of seeing something that had been watched by so few people felt special, the drawback of only being able to view the material in such limited circumstances outweighed the sense of privilege. The internet has made it possible to refer to visual material such as films while you are in the process of writing. This is my preferred method and, in my view, the more closely you examine your objects of study, the more likely you are to come up with ideas that are new and interesting.

On graduating from my MA course, I was offered funding for PhD research into an aspect of digital technology's influence on graphic design. While my research methods were still decidedly analogue, it was obvious that change was in the air. At the time my graphic designer friends were swept up by the rapid changes in typographic technology, so, influenced by their enthusiasm, I chose type as my subject. Through most of the 20th century typefaces had effectively been parts of largescale typesetting machines, but after the digital innovation of the late 1980s and 1990s that was no longer the case. By the early 1990s type was software that could be created entirely independent of the devices on which it was set. No longer the employees of

manufacturing companies, type designers became independent agents. A century-long profession was dismantled in under a decade.

I define my subject as the first 15 years of device-independent digital type design, 1985 to 1999. I began the project in 1993, so was researching in real time. It felt like a moment and in retrospect it was just that. There were passionate debates about typographic form, most pressingly about the virtues of legibility against those of self-expression. It was an era when we believed that one day everyone might design their own typeface. Looking back, however, it is clear that skill is a more significant bar to be a type designer than technology.

Writing history in the present, I relied heavily on interviews. Talking to designers was something I enjoyed, and I carried that through into my next project, a portfolio book titled *Restart: New Systems in Graphic Design* that was published by Thames and Hudson in 2001.[2] The initiative of the graphic designer Christian Küsters, this book and others of its kind were very much of the pre-digital era. The publishers were hoping that they would be bought by design studios who found themselves in need of inspiration. Christian and I used the opportunity to define what we felt was the most interesting thread in the graphic design of that moment. We believed that, rather than simply creating form itself, a new generation of designers were establishing systems through which graphic form was derived.

Apart from a few articles for design and art magazines, it was my first foray into non-academic writing. The book had an opening essay and a short text about each designer and Christian insisted that I ran these texts by each of their subjects for approval. At first, I resisted the idea of having my arguments endorsed by their subjects – it seemed all wrong to me – yet the process of talking to designers about the texts proved positive overall. Occasionally combative, it prompted me to consider the designers' work and their ambitions with more care. Looking back, it was training for the many catalogue essays I have written since. Not so much about expressing the writer's point of view, a catalogue essay is essentially a collaborative form, the aim of which is to expand the understanding of the work, to help the reader get as much out of it as possible.

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2 Christian Kusters and Emily King (ed.): *Restart: New Systems in Graphic Design*, London: Thames and Hudson 2001.

A few years later, I was asked to revisit the subject of my MA thesis for a monograph about the designer Robert Brownjohn. Titled *Sex and Typography*[3] after one of Brownjohn's own essays and published in 2005, it introduced me to the field of modern mythology. Brownjohn was a lifelong drug addict whose habit took him to unlikely places and often led him to behave in a memorable fashion. I dealt with this by telling his life story through quotes from his friends and colleagues, meanwhile I explored the work in a series of essays, each focussed on a single piece. Whether or not Brownjohn spent time in prison, or threw pasta at a prospective client, or fell asleep in his own lectures – this is a subject of conjecture, but the merit of his output is not.

Alongside writing, I have also had the opportunity to curate several exhibitions, among the most significant being *Wouldn't It Be Nice* in 2007 and *Quick, Quick, Slow* in 2009. The former was commissioned by the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva in partnership with the city's art and design schools, which were at that moment uniting into a single school, now known as HEAD (Haute Ecole d'Art et de Design). Intended to reflect the merging of the schools, the brief of the exhibition was to show art and design together, thereby demonstrating their common ground. The talk at the time was of the blurring of the boundaries of art and design, but as a design person I was having none of that. It was apparent then, and has become even more so since, that art is voracious. It sucks up everything in its path and spits it out as a ›found object‹. I believed the territory of ›design‹ needed defending. In collaboration with the art curator Katya Garcia Anton, I selected several practitioners whose work I was following and arrived at the concept of ›wishful thinking‹, in my mind a kind of qualified utopianism. The designers in the exhibition included Dexter Sinister, Bless, Dunne & Raby and the graphic design team GTF, who conceived the catalogue.

In my experience, curating allows more room for ambiguity than writing. Juxtaposing two objects or bodies of work allows for a multitude of lines of thought, some of which the curator might not even have imagined. I enjoyed that latitude again in curating *Quick, Quick Slow*. The prompt for this exhibition was an iteration of the Lisbon design biennial Experimenta on the theme of time, titled »About Time«. Giving the exhibition the subtitle »word, image and time«, I chose pieces of graphic design from the last one hundred years

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3 Emily King: Robert Brownjohn: *Sex and Typography*. 1925–1970. *Life and Work*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press 2005.

up to the present that either represented the passage of time or evoked time passing. Encompassing print, film and digital work, the exhibition allowed me to connect pieces across time and media in a way that was new to me.

Much of my output over the last twenty years has been monographic books and exhibitions. Alongside Robert Brownjohn, my subjects have included the graphic designers Alan Fletcher, Peter Saville and Richard Hollis and the graphic design team M/M Paris (Michael Amzalag and Mathias Augustyniak). When I started out it felt radical to be emphasising the role of the graphic designer, characters whose input had often remained anonymous. More recently, however, it has begun to feel like I have spent a large part of my career celebrating the output of white men (an occupational hazard for the graphic design historian). Keen to work outside this remit, I teamed up with the designer and curator Prem Krishnamurthy, who was pursuing enquiries into the relationship between design and political power. Together we programmed a conference titled »Design and Empire (Working Title)« in partnership with the Liverpool Biennial in 2017. Our aim was to explore whether the objects and processes of design might serve as forces of imperialism. The speakers included the artist partnership Cooking Sections, the architect Mae-Ling Lokko, the artist/aspiring entrepreneur Christopher Kulendrum Thomas, the fashion designer Grace Wales Bonner and Paul Elliman and together we explored the idea of empire in the broadest possible sense, taking in the cultural imperialism of the West, technological imperialism, and consumerist imperialism. Meanwhile the city of Liverpool, the setting of the conference, was built on the spoils of the British Empire, its architecture demonstrating imperial triumphalism, and so represented the term in its strictest sense.

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I am aware that my academic research and the resulting dissertations would have taken a different course if I was undertaking them today. The most obvious difference, one I have already mentioned, is the potential of the internet, but that is not the sole factor. Notably, it strikes me that the contemporary academic has to be more conscious of her own position in relation to the objects of her research, and also in her adoption of an authoritative voice in general. The pose of academic neutrality is no longer viable; every researcher and writer brings their own experiences to bear on their subject and, happi-

ly, it is now considered appropriate to be upfront about that. The need to be transparent about my stance has become increasingly pressing to me across my work, and it has likewise become live in the academy.