Image by Peri Linklater-Johnson
Words Robyn Cook

**What's the point of an MA in design anyway?**

Ideally, what should be said to every student, repeatedly, throughout his or her school life is something like this: "You are in the process of being indoctrinated. We have not yet evolved a system of education that is not a system of indoctrination. We are sorry, but it is the best we can do. What you are being taught here is an amalgam of current prejudice and the choices of this particular culture. The slightest look at history will show how impermanent these must be"
Doris Lessing, **The Golden Notebook**.

The idea of an MA degree in design is often met with reluctance. I remember the response from my own creative director when I enrolled for an MA programme: a perplexed "but why?" (as in, "why would you bother?"). A brief scan of Reddit and Whatuni reveals a similar kind of attitude from undergrads: "It's a waste of time and money…" or "it won't help you get a job…" etc. So, what is the point of doing a Master's degree in design?

Lessing's comment highlights, paradoxically, the value of an MA. That is, it allows designers to go beyond the "hidden curriculum" (and indeed, every curriculum has a hidden curriculum) by equipping them with the critical tools necessary to reveal, refuse and upend. It encourages designers to recognise that the field of design and the act of designing is not a neutral, isolated or value-free activity. And ultimately to chart new paths and lines outside of the parameters inscribed by our current systems. Critically, this shouldn't be seen or understood as being in opposition to mainstream design, but rather as operating in parallel – encouraging a rigour and criticality of practice. This is, I would argue, is all the more imperative given our rapidly evolving technological and cultural landscape; where we are producing 2.5 quintillion gigabytes of data daily; and where algorithms, automation and AI are rapidly encroaching into traditional domains of design.

Students at Falmouth are using this adversarial approach to create work that responds directly to these, and other issues, as part of their MA research. Sekyeong Kwon, for example, developed Michael Barnes – a computationally generated (Python, Markov chain sequencing, etc.) 'designer' complete with unique portfolio, biography and manifesto. Barnes' represents but one randomised version of a potentially exponential number of 'designers' and 'portfolios' that could have been algorithmically generated – thus acting as a provocation around the future of design in the age of intelligent machines.
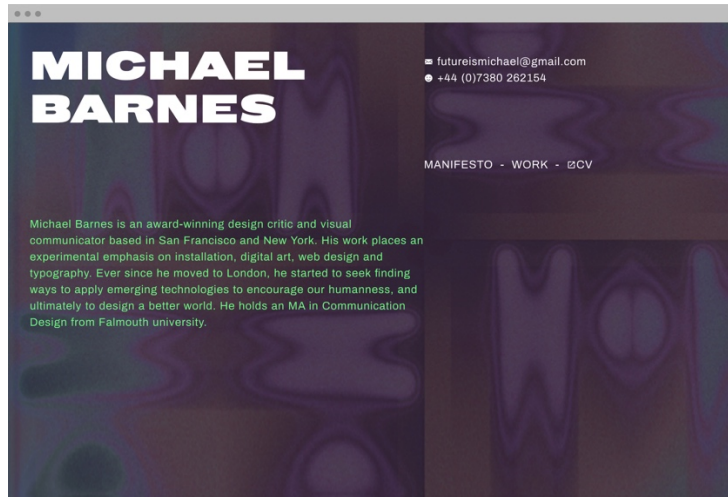
[Yehya Al-Hafidh](#) explored the trajectory of our current neoliberal economic paradigm, and the associated commoditisation of basic infrastructure through his project 'Metered Air'. The respiratory air purifying mask logs each user's daily intake of air which would then allow governments or private corporations to tax or sell back clean air at a premium – a disturbing speculative idea that is not entirely implausible given the ongoing push for the privatisation of water globally.

Amelia Rowe's project Ei (Ethical intelligence); is an experimental AI add-on for your home appliances that adjusts the device's response according to the ethical principle selected. Ethical presets include 'Deontology' (which prioritises moral duty), 'Autonomy' (for the self-seeking), and 'Utilitarianism' (which maximises benefits for the majority). The result could be (inter alia) a printer that simply refuses to print, or a TV that self-censors.

Returning to the question '**what's the point of an MA in design anyway?'**, ultimately, the decision of whether to do an MA in design is a personal one. And of course, given the current status of student funding, it's also a financial one. But at the heart of the decision lies two separate views of design and design education. One which sees design as being purely instrumental – a matter of learning to be productive within the logic of the present system. The other, conversely, sees design as (to borrow from Paulo Freire) "a practice of freedom" in which designers are encouraged to engage critically with their practice, its reality, and its potentially transformative (and indeed, often destructive) role in society.

So, will an MA help you get a job? The answer would be yes and no. It would depend on the kind of job you want and whether you are looking to work in an environment that values independent, critical thought alongside the craft of design. But, if the question is will an MA make you a better, more engaged designer? Then, I would argue, yes, absolutely.

The MA Communication Design at Falmouth University is a transformative and reflective 45-week programme; which seeks to provoke the development of an individual voice and identity in the practice and business of communication design. The course is delivered in the context of a rapidly changing, complex and accelerating media world; one in a continuous collision with ever-evolving political, cultural and ethical catalysts. Engagement with projects and insights from leading global "provocateurs" from within and beyond the creative industries ensures a contemporary currency to the experience and a journey that delivers the skills to inspire and shape new practices and subject innovation. Against this backdrop, applicants from a variety of fields – where the ability to create meaningful and effective ideas is paramount – are encouraged to apply. Examples include those with a background in visual communication, design or associated arts practice, but also scientists, programmers, and writers.

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