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# Unloosed: Designing Participatory Objects

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# Unloosed:

Designing Participatory Objects

# Unloosed: Designing Participatory Objects

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Design, Visual Communications at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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May 2014

*Loosen:* to make less tight; slacken or relax

*Unloosen:* undo, let free

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*“A graphic designer is an intermediary. He is never at the beginning or the end of a process.”*

Joost Grootens

## Abstract

The ubiquity of technology has mediated the means of receiving content through digital networks; users have complete control over receiving, shaping, and sharing information. In contrast to the inherent elasticity of these networks, physical pieces of communication often manifest through a closed and highly controlled process. However, the increased prominence of user-interaction with media provides an opportunity to evaluate the design process as it applies to the creation of physical objects.

Throughout much of my work, I investigate the potential for unloosening the control of designed objects by inviting others into the design process. By considering the audience as active participants, rather than passive receivers of communication, the designer becomes a facilitator for communication. Through the design of frameworks, the designer relinquishes some control of form or content, allowing author and audience to coalesce.



## Argument

In the digital environment, visual communication is a dynamic process between designer and participant, capable of changing and evolving through user-input.

*Translating this process to physical artifacts, the designer now acts as a facilitator for communication, rather than a creator.*

Through the design of frameworks, participants become active in the creation of form and content. When communication evolves through participatory co-creation, the relationship between designer, participant and the design object is strengthened.

## Introduction

My fascination with frameworks began in the form of grid paper in one of my high school notebooks. It was the perfect intermediary between a blank sheet and ruled paper—the former being too intimidating, the latter too restrictive. Grid paper provided a structure, but granted enough freedom to work within the frame. I could draw lines, connect points, fill in squares, or drift from the grid entirely. It felt comfortable to create within constraints, which led me to apply to an architecture program in Minnesota. Architecture felt like it could equally satisfy both hemispheres of the brain, keeping me content in this intermediary space.

Instead of taking the traditional route of semester-long studios, I applied for a track that offered smaller workshops. This route introduced me to a variety of design disciplines situated around architecture: toy design, lighting design, exploratory architectural drawing, and graphic design. Through these short, but rigorous workshops, I became more interested in the tangibility and physicality of designed objects, rather than the incomprehensible vastness of designed space. In my last semester as an undergraduate student, I took a portfolio design course—my first introduction to graphic design. I was introduced to the idea of the page as a space; the page became physical. I was introduced to type and image hierarchy, page layout, the importance of paper quality, and the grid. I learned how to shape space on the page. I found a new comfort in graphic design; it dealt with physicality, and I was still able to create within constraints.

## Context

The omnipresence of technology in contemporary culture has delineated the means of consuming information. Users have nearly complete control over their own media and social interaction, participating in digital networks that are inherently elastic and continually expanding. With the general public no longer satisfied to be passive receivers of information, their growing sense of control has given them an increasingly voracious appetite for contributing, sharing, and organizing their own content.

*The emergence of this new participatory audience provides an opportunity to examine the potential for malleability in the physical object.*

In contrast to its digital counterpart, the physical piece of communication is often static, a one-way transmitter of content, and highly controlled throughout the design process. Its presence rejects the flow of digital streams; the physical reality of the object means that it can be handled, touched and digested slowly. In much of my work, I investigate the intersection of these seemingly opposite apparatuses, attempting to imbue the participatory attributes of the digital into the designed physical object. My intention is to explore the potential for elasticity in such objects by inviting co-creation into the design process.

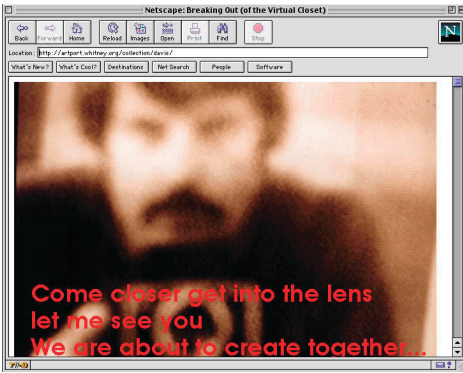
1. Armstrong, *Participate: Designing with User-Generated Content*, 43.

In *Participate: Designing with User-Generated Content*, designer Helen Armstrong differentiates co-creation and collaboration: typical collaborative methods involve two or more parties working together with a shared goal, while co-creation encourages others to contribute small parts towards a greater whole, flattening hierarchical orders.<sup>1</sup> Co-creation also allows for flexibility within a designed framework, opening up the traditionally controlled design process. Thus, the designer becomes an intermediary, a facilitator for many voices. Rather than controlling the lines of communication, the designer-as-facilitator opens these lines to others, allowing participants to control at least some form or content of the design.

To invite participation into the design process, the designer's role becomes focused on defining three primary components that constitute the framework. These elements are: the container or space for content and/or form to be inserted; constraints for the creation of form and/or content; and the participants. The definition of these elements may be quite loose or highly controlled, but are essential in the consideration of engaging participation in a design project.

*The importance lies not in how controlled these elements are, but how this control—or lack thereof—affects the final outcome.*





Left and above: The “official” image of the project and installation view

Davis’ argument serves as a contemporary response to Walter Benjamin’s 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in which Benjamin argues that through the process of reproduction, the original work of art is stripped of its intangible quality related to the time and culture that it was created, and the space it occupies; he introduces this elusive quality as an artwork’s aura.<sup>3</sup>

2. Davis, “The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction (An Evolving Thesis: 1991–1995)”

3. Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

4. <http://artport.whitney.org/DouglasDavis/live/writesentence.html>

THE ONLY RULE WE HAVE, LIKE THE RULES IN A CHILD’S GAME, IS:

DOWN WITH PERIODS! NEVER END YOUR SENTENCE AND THEREFORE...

NEVER END THIS SENTENCE

LET IT GO ON FOREVER

COPIED, PUBLISHED, USED, FRAMED, INSTALLED ANYWHERE, BY YOU

Text from “The World’s First Collaborative Sentence”

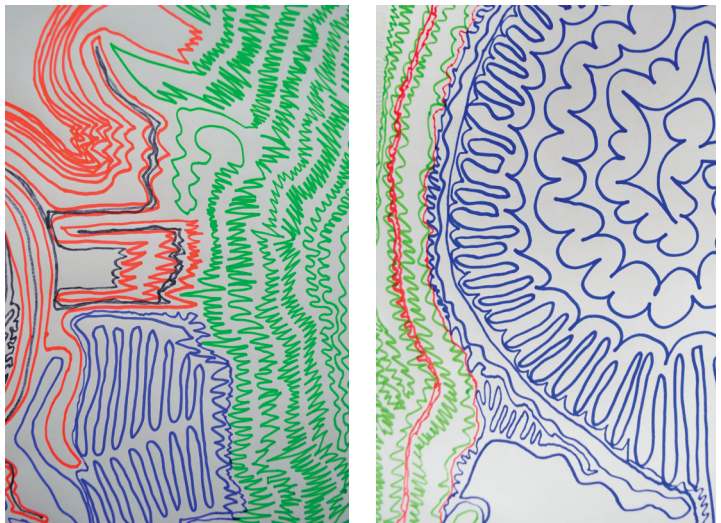
The aura, in Davis’ argument, has shifted from the object to the originality of the moment of reproduction that happens when an audience copies, interacts, and redistributes through digital means. In his 1995 piece “The World’s First Collaborative Sentence,” Davis devised a simple digital framework, a website that allowed anyone to contribute to the sentence; the only rule was that a contributor could never complete the sentence with a period.<sup>4</sup> The artwork became the sum of its parts. The 200,000-plus contributions read like the collective unconsciousness of the internet, loaded with song lyrics, incomprehensible text, graphics, images, and links. The aura of the piece, however, was not located in the content, but rather in the user’s moment of originality when they participated as an author. Davis’ role, therefore, shifted to initiator, defining parameters for the process of participation to function independently.

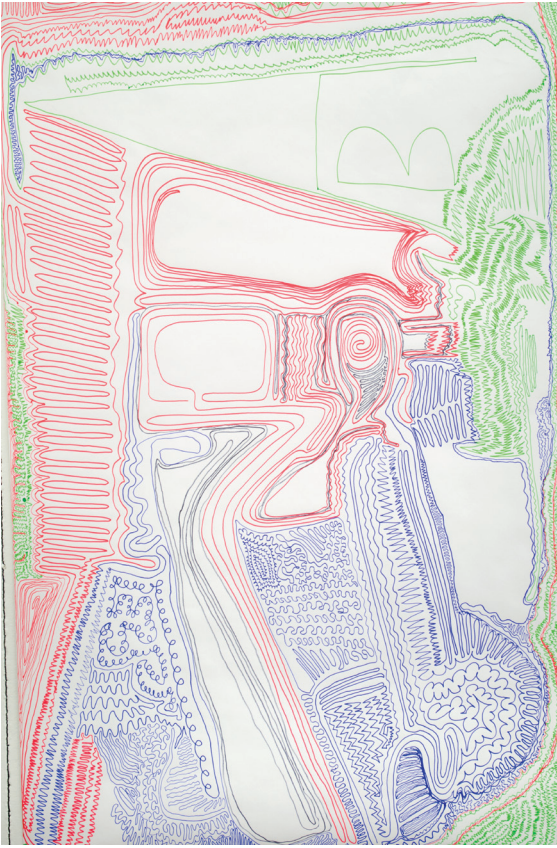
For participation to occur, the definition of these parameters—the framework—is delegated to the designer. The designer relinquishes partial control of form and content in exchange for opening up part of the design process to others. This framework can take a variety of forms, from the creation of a loose space and boundaries for an undefined audience to contribute, to a highly defined space and rule set. Leveraging human processing, the Dutch group *CONDITIONAL DESIGN* defines rule sets, which are then executed, emphasizing the process over the product. Many of their experimental workshops utilize a group of people and simple materials—tape, markers, paper, stickers, rules—to create their work. In a workshop titled “Four Long Lines,” the rules are as follows:

1. Play with four players.
2. Each player has a colored pen: red, green, blue, or black.
3. The players draw simultaneously.
4. Draw one long line during 1.5 hours.
  - The pen may not leave the paper during the entire time.
  - You may stop for a maximum of 5 seconds without lifting the pen.
  - Do not cross any other lines.
5. The drawing is done after 1.5 hours.<sup>5</sup>

5. Maurer, Puckey, Paulus, Wouters, *Conditional Design Workbook*

*Right:* Details of graduate students acting out the rules for “Four Long Lines”





*Rather than allowing for a designer's subjectivity to control the form, the group designs clear rules that allow others' subjectivity to be distributed throughout the process. These rules effectively remove the designer's responsibility for the creation of a singular form, but instead open the potential for many visual formations. The process of acting out these rules is the product.*





*This page:* The designer's own photographs are combined with other content collected throughout the community.



Above: Books were gifted back to the community.

Davis argues that the aura has shifted from the object to moments of interaction. If so, the graphic designer's new obligation is not only to the object itself, but to the increasing levels of participation with the object expected from its audience. However, this interaction can happen in different stages of the design process, as PAUL SOULELLIS' book *530* explores. Rather than allowing co-creation to manifest within a pre-designed framework, Soulellis placed himself in the middle of the process—collecting conversations, interviews, recipes, stories, images, and data of a small Icelandic town during a three-month long residency.<sup>6</sup>

6. Soulellis, *530*,  
<http://soulellis.com/projects/530-2/>

7. Soulellis, personal communication, February 17, 2014

Throughout Soulellis' process, co-creation evolved naturally, the loose framework being the designer's own search for content and voluntary contributions from the residents. Instead of placing specific constraints on participants during the collection process, he placed constraints on himself and the organization of the content.<sup>7</sup> Arranging the content into 39 distinct chapters, he determined their order by assigning each a number and using a random-number generator to determine the sequence. The only controlled element were the transitions between the chapters. The books were then given back to the residents, establishing a connection to the book that extended beyond the individual maker and out to an entire community of participants. Though participation was less a factor in the creation of this project, it introduced the importance of the physical object—how stronger connections between people can be created through the creation and sharing of objects.



Included in the publication were small mementos of the town: this icon is used as a way to mark a farmers' flock of sheep.

*“...in lieu of the forelorn designer, the possibility of many designers; the loss of designs that are highly controlled and prescribed and the ascendancy of enabling or generative systems; the end of discrete objects, hermetic meanings, and the beginning of connected ecologies.”*

Andrew Blauvelt

## Process

Navigating the elements of participatory design—container, rule, and participant—became the focus of much of my work. Experimenting with varying levels of control of these elements, I investigated different methods of inviting participation into the design process.

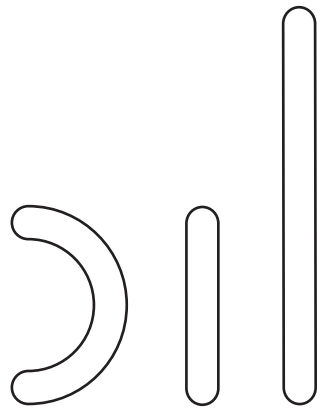
COLOR  
ENCODED

*Color Encoded* utilizes a simple interface to facilitate visual and verbal message-making in public space. To promote the creation of both the verbal and visual, I created a simple set of shapes derived from the most elementary shapes of letterforms. These three elements—two straight pieces and a half-circle—could create a rudimentary form of each letter of the alphabet.

The full kit, consisting of 81 laser-cut wooden pieces, was installed in the third floor hallway of the Pollak Building. I attached magnets on each of the pieces, and placed them on a magnetic sheet, originally setting up the pieces as the alphabet. Reminiscent of playing with magnets on a refrigerator, interaction was playful, easy, and intuitive—the first interactions happened a few minutes after the piece was set up. Participants would often stop between classes, even to change one word of a message, an image, or only move a few pieces around.



Color-coding:  
Elements comprising each letterform were painted in the same color.











The piece became a form of temporary graffiti; messages and images appeared and vanished quickly. Most messages were short: “More coffee please” to “SUMMER!” read like tweets from the floor. Often this created a series of messages, one responding to another: “Jorge kiss Hong,” “Hong kick Jim,” to “Super Hong.” Images of frazzled faces, umbrellas

reflected the current state of affairs. Students’ experimented with type; shrinking and expanding letterforms. The board became a space for hanging up flyers and other ephemera. The content assembled on the project offered a glimpse into the culture of the third floor of Pollak.

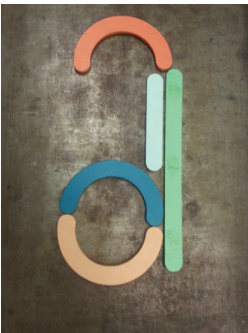
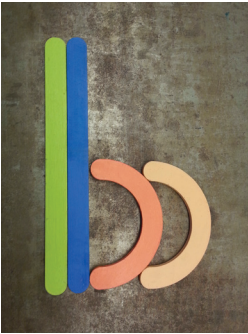


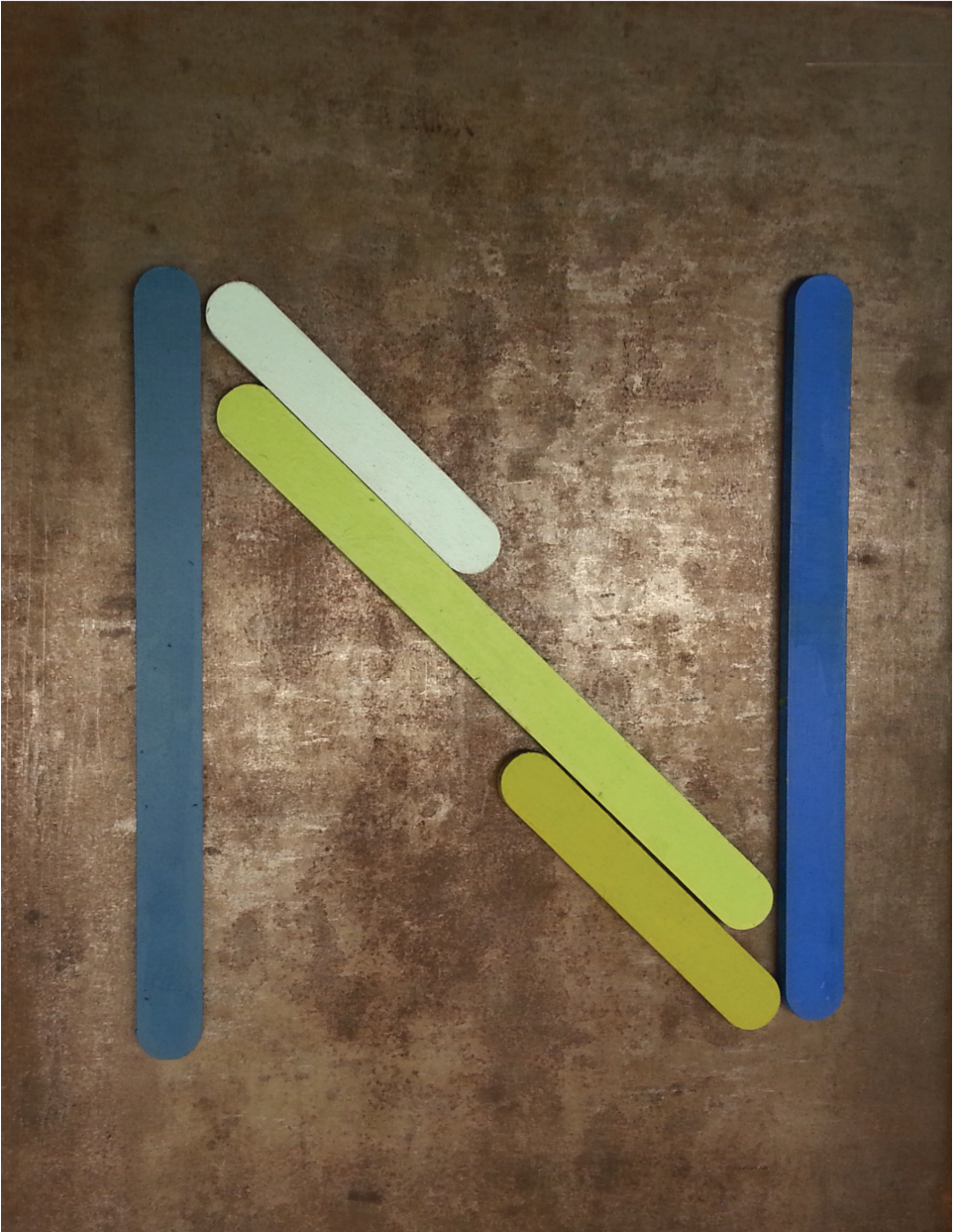


## COLOR ENCODED WORKSHOP

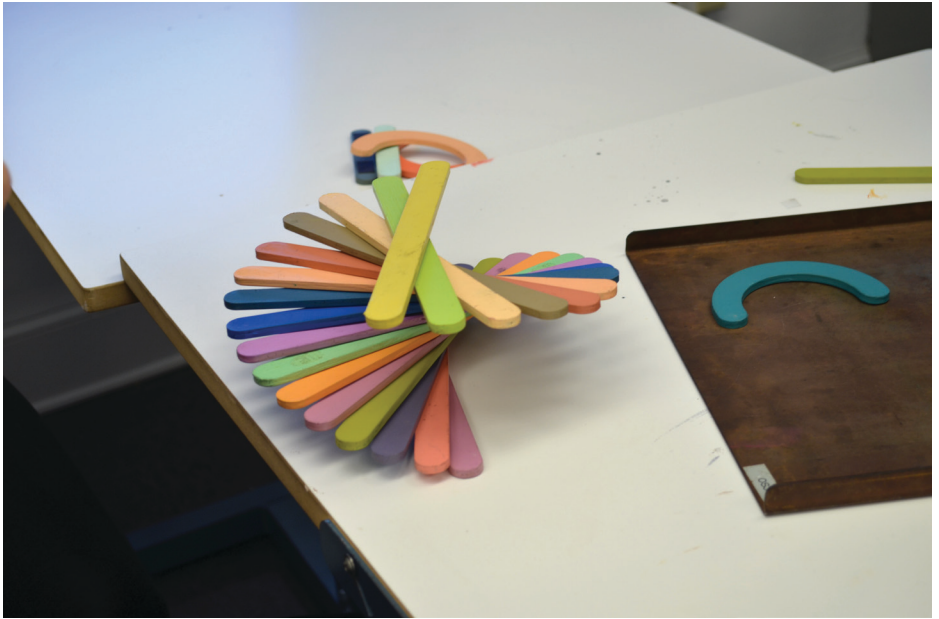
While I enjoyed watching the level of creativity and play by my peers, I wondered if *Color Encoded* could serve a function beyond an implement for self-expression. In terms of defining the framework, there were no firm constraints in place.

In my third semester, I was given the opportunity to run a type workshop in the VCU Communication Arts program, using *Color Encoded* as the foundation for the workshop. New to typography, this group became a perfect opportunity to utilize the letterform elements as a tool for creating experimental type—an aspect I enjoyed in the earlier incarnation of the project. Organized into small groups, each was assigned a letter of the alphabet, and then asked to generate as many forms as possible. After quickly working through obvious solutions, students began to experiment by elongating, stretching, and altering forms. Eventually, they began stacking pieces to create 3-D letterforms, which could only be viewed “correctly” at a certain angle. A simple constraint of creating variations of only one letterform allowed for a few ingenious results.

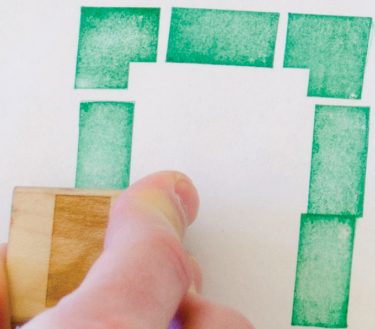
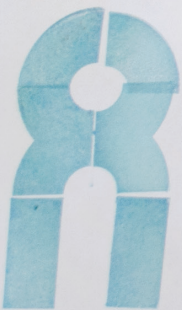






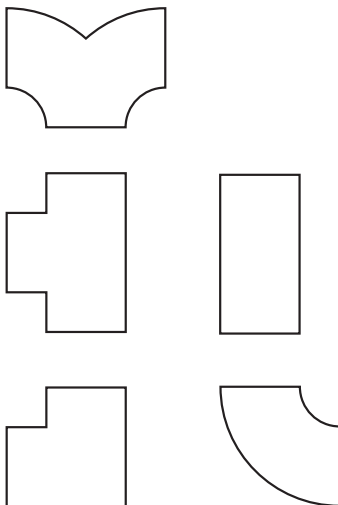


Above: Students stacked pieces to create an "O".  
Left: Students work on creating 2-D and 3-D letterforms.





The second phase of the workshop utilized a stamp kit I had created based on the shapes from the original *Color Encoded* project, with a few additional shapes added in to the kit. Students were asked to pick any letter and to roll a pair of dice; the number they rolled dictated how many times they could use the stamps to create their letterform. By ceding some control over to chance, it encouraged students to think beyond preconceived notions of how a letterform should look. Most students struggled initially, but after the second or third attempts, they embraced the constraint and generated interesting results.

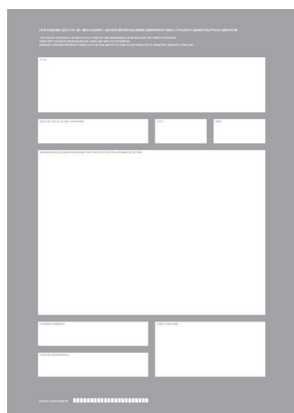




# RICK GRIFFITH

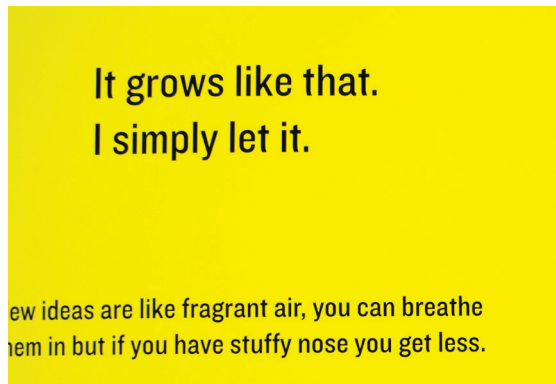
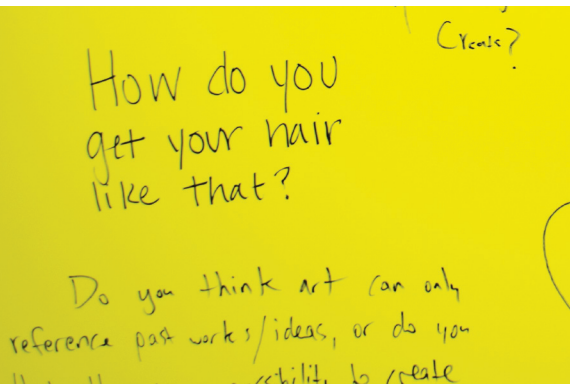
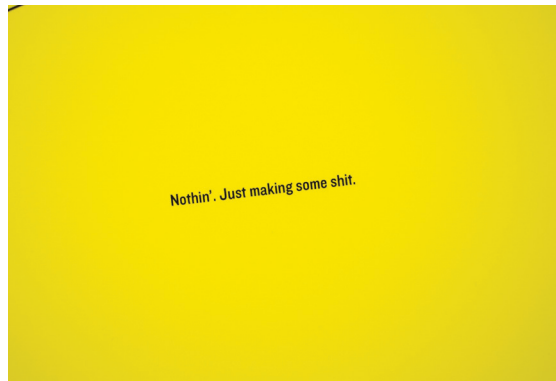
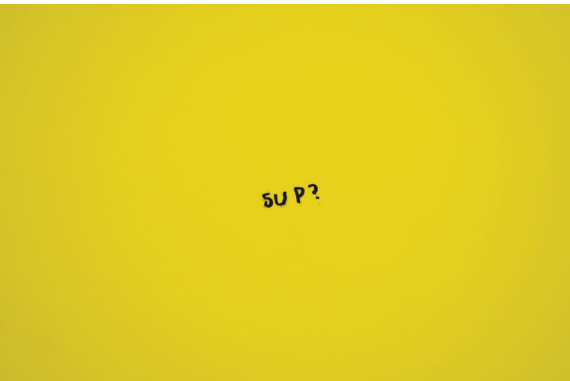
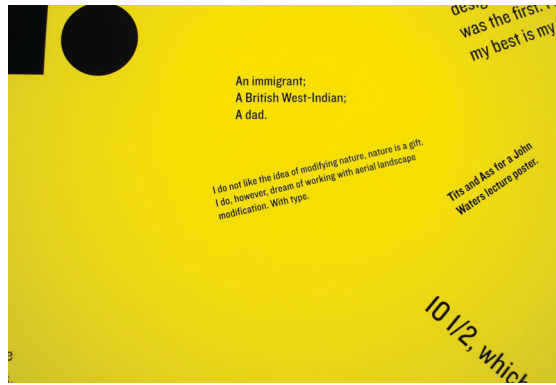
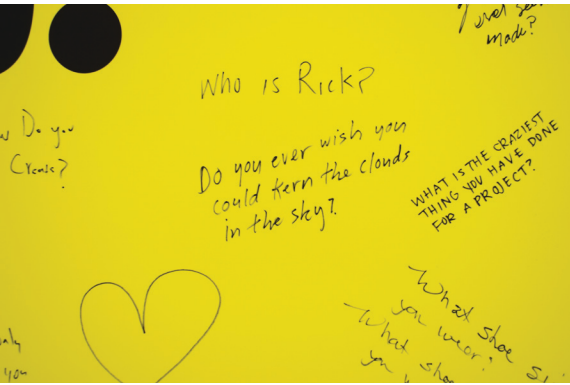
As part of the Department of Graphic Design’s ongoing *Objects and Methods* lecture series, I was asked to design a poster for typographer, letterpress printer and educator Rick Griffith. The title of his lecture, “Design Questions, and Answers,” became the starting point for the concept—to see if I could create a dialogue between students and Mr. Griffith before he even arrived.

The poster was left nearly blank besides pertinent information about the lecture. The only other elements were a “Q:” and the statement “Ask Rick.” A pen hung next to the poster as an invitation to write. By the end of the week, 17 questions were asked, ranging from serious inquiries (“Should art be free of morals?”) to humorous quips (“If you could chuck wood, would you?”). I sent these questions to Mr. Griffith, which he graciously answered. The day before the lecture, his answers were hung as a second poster alongside the questions, establishing a dialogue between Griffith, the students, and the two posters. Instead of using the poster format as a means of distributing information, it became a space for active participation and content generation.



Daniel Eatock, *Utilitarian Poster*, 1998

Eatock’s templated poster, designed with blanks for event name, location, and time influenced me in my consideration for my design for Griffith’s lecture poster.





# A:

I'm not clear about your future...maybe if I got to know you better.

That's not fair.  
Next question.

The worst piece of design I ever made... was the first. I hope my best is my last.

An immigrant.  
A British West Indian.  
A dad.

I do not like the idea of teaching others, unless it's a job.  
I do, however, enjoy it working with some teachers.  
ambiguously. With love.

Yes and No for a John  
Waters's history lesson.

It grows like that.  
I simply let it.

New ideas are like fragrant air, you can breathe them in but if you have stuffy nose you get less.

The shape or form of new ideas is not important right now; it's the mechanics or transmission of old ideas which is so profoundly important at this time. From there...new ideas will take form.

I don't know how to talk about art. But my impulse is to say art should be free of everything except an ethic of production.

Not into low earth orbit...unfortunately.

Yes I have.

It had to change it would ALWAYS be hard work, but this is simply a way of saying "I would never should NEVER be like."

Once a year I divorce the practice and my complex modern life for 3-4 days of writing, reading, and listening, during which I hardly talk. Talking is not good for me if I need to write. I must write and read for inspiration.

10/12, which is just fine for me.

I was not other college where I began to "learn" it was long before that. I was not in the park at 17 years old. I was in a zoo at the time.

To whom did I owe the pleasure?

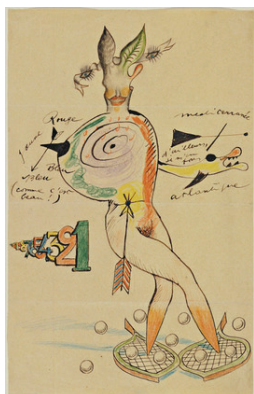
## RICK ANSWERS.

**RICK ANSWERS**  
DESIGN, EDUCATION, AND HISTORY  
INLECTS - METHODS LECTURE SERIES  
TUESDAY 10 OCT. 4 PM - 6:00PM  
READING ROOM LEARNING COMMONS (R10)  
RHSB 2008

RICK ANSWERS is a series of lectures and discussions that explore the intersections of design, education, and history. The series is presented in partnership with the Reading Room Learning Commons (R10) and the Reading Room Learning Commons (R10). The series is presented in partnership with the Reading Room Learning Commons (R10) and the Reading Room Learning Commons (R10). The series is presented in partnership with the Reading Room Learning Commons (R10) and the Reading Room Learning Commons (R10).

# MONO

For this project, I designed the complete framework before setting the project in motion—defining a container, rule set, and user group. The result, *MONO*, was a printed newsprint publication with design work from graduate students and visiting faculty in the Department of Graphic Design. Instead of thinking of a publication as a collection of finished work, I created a framework for participants to create something specifically for and within the context of the publication. Utilizing the idea of the *Exquisite Corpse*, each person was given a 1/2" strip of the previous designer's piece to work from, and chose another 1/2" strip to pass on to the next person. I acted as the publication's facilitator, gathering work and distributing imagery to the next person. The publication became a complete circuit, each design visually linked to the previous submission.



*Exquisite Corpse*, 1925

Created by the Surrealists, this game was a method of collective collage; following a rule, participants contributed pieces of a drawing without seeing the entirety of the previous contribution. This way of creating was influential to the design of the framework for this project.



**M**

Laura Schlifer  
Alex Bruno  
Hong Zhang  
Xi Lu  
Laurie Culshaw  
Stephanie Clark  
Yae-Young (Emily) Park  
Nicole Killian  
Dafi Kühne  
Idil Clingiroglu  
Sarah Baugh

A publication by VCU Graphic Design graduate students

**N**

The theme, *Peripheral Vision*, allowed for experimentation and creation outside of the realm of one's normal body of work. To embrace this theme, each person handed off a strip of their work as the basis for the next person's design.

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Fall 2013

**O**

A special thank you to this year's Designers-in-Residence, Nicole Killian and Dafi Kühne, for their participation.

**gdes**  
vcuarts



Laura → Alex

Alex → Hong



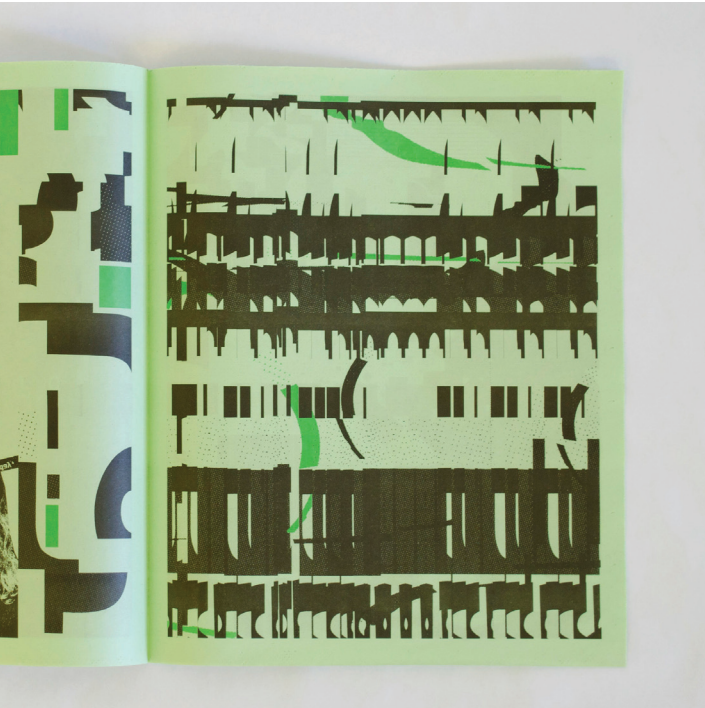


Hong → Luxi

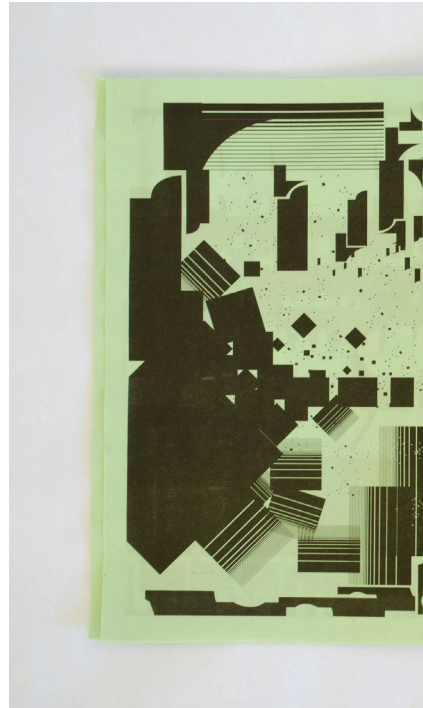


Luxi → Laurie

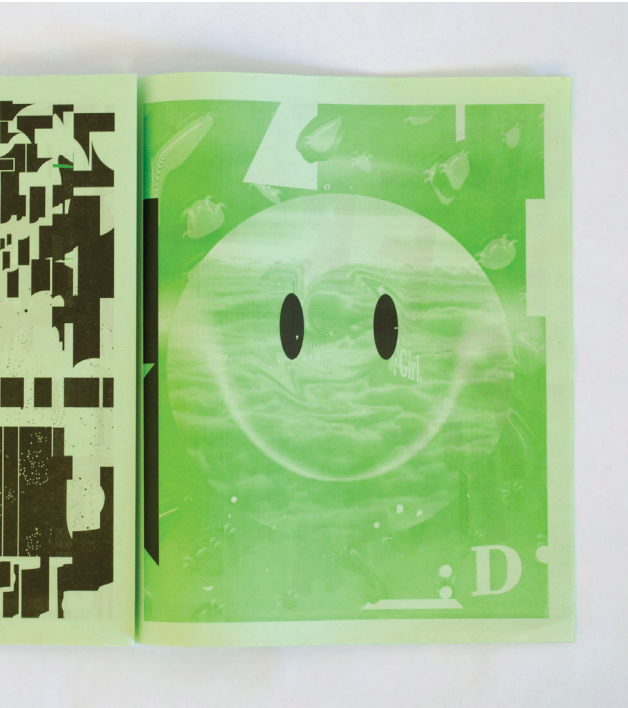




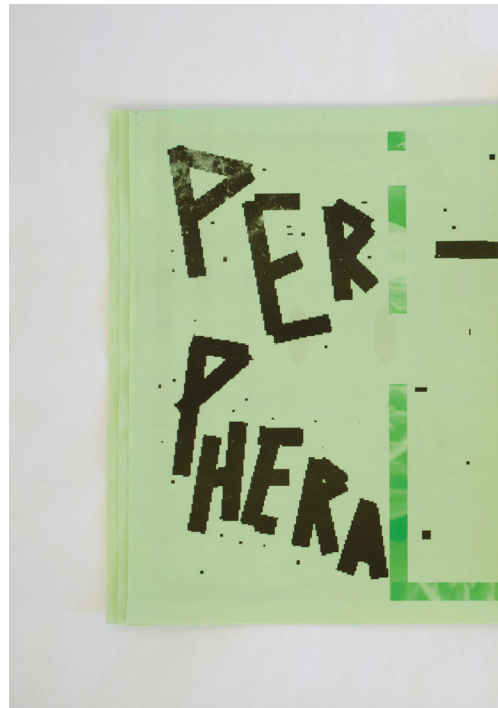
Laurie → Stephanie



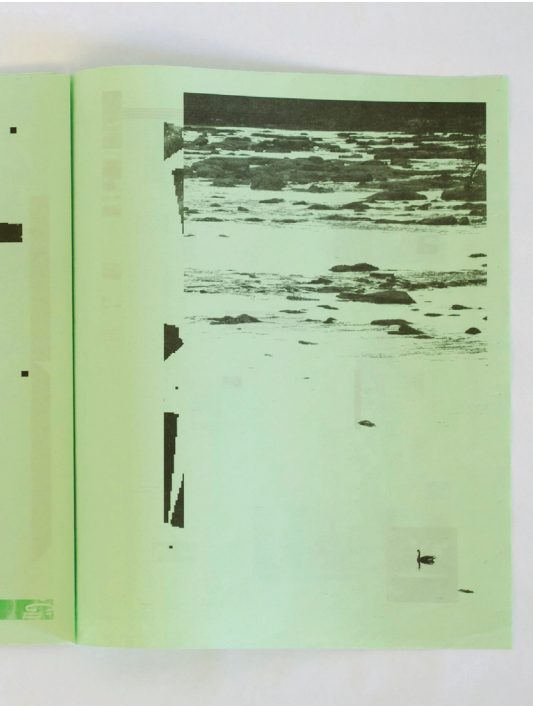
Stephanie → Emily



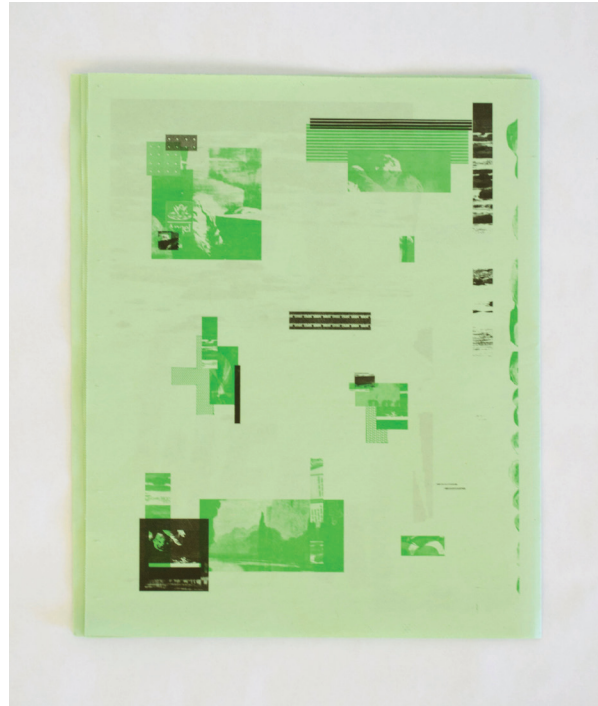
Emily → Nicole



Nicole → Dafi



Dafi → Idil



Idil → Sarah

After the project, however, I was left somewhat unsatisfied; in terms of facilitating participation amongst my peers, it was quite successful, but for allowing participation to alter the final form of the object, the project fell short. Once a participant submitted content, I had no control over the presentation of content other than to place it in a prescribed box on a page—this was a part of the pre-determined framework. Though I was a facilitator and a participant, I felt as though I held little responsibility for the outcome of the project because the framework for presentation was too restricted. While it was a wonderful opportunity to create something as a graduate group, there seemed to be little significance to the project beyond that. Since there was no opportunity for any others, besides the prescribed group of people, to participate, the audience became passive receivers of the publication.

It was through this project that I realized the importance of a closer relationship, or at least a more considered connection, between designer, participant, and the designed object. Successful elements from past projects had risen from anonymous and/or voluntary participation from an undefined audience, especially in *Color Encoded* and the Rick Griffith lecture poster; temporary communities were created around both projects because the audience was able to become an active participant. I wanted to begin to investigate how the role of the designer-facilitator could be better utilized in creating connections between multiple groups of people, using the object as the connecting agent.

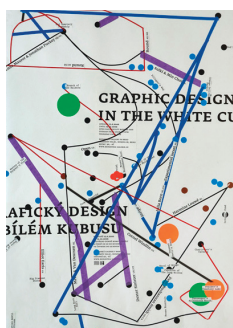
*“Organizing graphic design exhibitions is always problematic: graphic design does not exist in a vacuum, and the walls of the exhibition space effectively isolate the work of design from the real world...Presenting design in an exhibition space in this way is akin to looking at a collection of stuffed birds in order to study how they fly and sing.”*

Peter Bil'ak

Taking a work of graphic design out of everyday use and placing it into a gallery context results in a loss of an essential aspect of its aura. To examine this issue, designer Peter Bil'ak organized the exhibit, *Graphic Design in the White Cube*, at the 2006 International Biennale of Graphic Design in Brno. Instead of recreating an environment in the gallery for projects to live within, Bil'ak chose to use the gallery context as the condition for the work. He commissioned 19 designers to make a poster for the gallery, asking them to treat the commission like any other project. The posters functioned on two levels: they became the content of the show, but also were used in its promotion.

Borrowing Bil'ak's philosophy from this exhibit, I set out to utilize the gallery space that would be used for the VCU MFA exhibitions as the context for my final project. Exhibiting with other fine artists and designers presented

a unique, if not slightly intimidating opportunity. I initially became interested in how the show was promoted to the public—what materials were produced and how the work of each student was presented. I gravitated toward the idea of creating a thesis catalogue, and after inquiring, learned that the information was not distributed to the public nor made available to the people attending the show. Furthermore, in recent years, the catalogue has only existed as a PDF file; it is no longer a tangible object. I felt there was an opportunity to combine the context, the exhibiting artists, as well as gallery attendants as integral components of the final work.



Posters for *Graphic Design in the White Cube*  
Luna Maurer,  
Norm, Stripe



*Graphic Design in the White Cube*  
Process design work from Luna Maurer

To facilitate a connection between the two groups of people—the artists and the public—I devised a framework for the project that would allow for input from multiple groups. Using past MFA catalogues as a precedent, I decided that the final container for the collection of content would be a publication. But instead of thinking of the publication as a bound, finished piece with a singular narrative, I would leave the content unbound, and essentially unfinished; offering its narration to be completed by the user at the exhibit.

Unlike the traditional exhibition catalogue that showcases works that are deemed “finished” by the exhibitors, I wanted to produce a document that emphasized process over final product, focusing on the work that had already been done during the first year and a half of school. During the first month of the fourth semester, I connected with the other departments within the School of the Arts. I sent out emails to every student in every department that would be exhibiting in the thesis show. Slowly, I began setting up meetings with interested students and I discussed with them the idea of contributing examples of their process that spoke to their final work in some way. It was only after meeting with several students, that I truly realized the variety in what constituted an artist’s or designer’s idea of “process”—the material given to me included sketches, visual research, drawings, and writing. The publication, therefore, became more like a collage. Utilizing the content generated and contributed by fellow graduate students as my raw material, I created individually formatted pieces for each person’s submission. This looseness of content would allow items to get shuffled around, and for new connections to be made between people and disciplines.

*Right:* Email sent to all exhibiting artists and designers explaining the project and a call for participation

From: Laura Schlifer  
Date: February 2, 2014  
Subject: Hello! An Introduction + A Question

Hello!

My name is Laura, and I'm a second year graduate student in the graphic design program. I wanted to write you a note about a project I am trying to put together, and to see if you'd be interested in participating. I'm trying to use the opportunity of the thesis project as a way to bring the MFA community together, at least in some small way.

For my final project, I am interesting in compiling process work from all the departments to design a publication for the entire VCU MFA community, which could function alongside the thesis catalogue (this tends to come out much later after the thesis show, and lately, only in PDF form...). The current thesis catalogue features work in its final state, but as a school that is quite focused on process, including lots of making, research, writing, conferences, and residencies, I am wondering if there is potential to highlight this aspect of our education as well. My goal is to have this publication on display for my thesis exhibition; designed as parts of a whole, gallery goers can create their own publication with the myriad of content available.

I would never want to ask too much of any of you, since I know you are all incredibly busy, so I'm looking for things that have already been completed, or very near completion. This could include images of past work, papers, sketchbook scans, video stills, ephemera—any kind of process work that speaks to your final work in the show.

This email is to gauge general interest amongst the students. I would love to meet in person to talk about your work a little if you are interested in participating, or if you have questions.

So please, let me know your questions, concerns, thoughts—everything.

Thanks so much for your time,  
Laura





More ▾

1-34 of 34

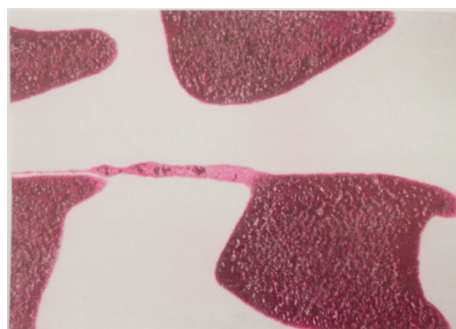
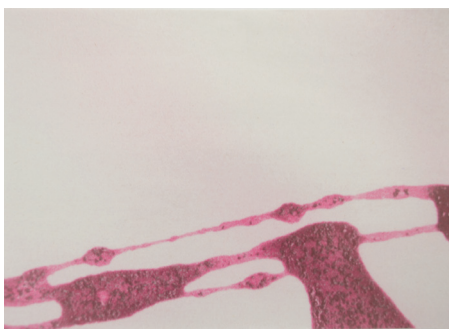


<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	me, Isabela, Victoria (22)	Hello! A question for you - Yes, this is great! Thank you! On Fri, Mar 14, 2014 at 2:17 PM, Sanders, Victoria <mathi@me.com>	Mar 14
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Cynthia Henebry	more process work...	Mar 13
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	me .. Michael, nick (29)	Hello! And introduction + a question - Michael, Yes, it was great to talk to you as well! Thanks so much for showing me the photos!	Mar 13
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Isabela, me (2)	Isabela Tavares de Melo wants to share "Costumes" with you - Hello, Thank you two so much for showing me the photos!	Mar 12
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Cynthia, me (2)	another one for you... - ah! thank you! On Thu, Mar 6, 2014 at 1:59 PM, Cynthia Henebry <cynthiahenebry@me.com>	Mar 7
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	me, Zach, Caryn (11)	Hello! - Hi Laura! Below are some quotes and attached are some images (I attached a few so you can pick from them)	Mar 5
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	me, Jamie (2)	Meeting with Joe Seipel - Fingers crossed. I recommend you bring visuals! On Tue, Mar 4, 2014 at 6:37 PM, Laura Schiffer <lschiffer@myvcu.edu>	Mar 4
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Andrea .. Erika, me (23)	Thesis Publication - Yep, 11:15 is perfect. Be careful if you're on side streets, there is a nice thick layer of ice on the road!	Mar 4
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	me, Franklin (2)	Thank you! - Laura, We'll look forward to working with you. Jay John R. "Jay" Overbey, III President	Mar 4
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	me .. Jane, VCU, Erin (34)	<a href="#">Follow up</a> Hello! An Introduction + A Question - Anytime, girl! I'll keep looking! On Mon, Feb 24, 2014 at 12:41 PM	Mar 2
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Torrie, me (2)	Torrie Sanders shared "Art Exhibit" with you - Torrie used Dropbox to share some files with you! Click here to view / download the files!	Feb 26
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	me, Morgan (7)	hello! - Hi Morgan, Just wanted to check in again to see if you're interested in including some work! I'll be happy to help!	Feb 25
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Cynthia, me (2)	one more - Thank you, Cynthia! On Tue, Feb 25, 2014 at 1:15 PM, Cynthia Henebry <cynthiahenebry@me.com>	Feb 25
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Cynthia, me (3)	photos - Hi Laura, These are just some iPhone photos for the most part, not sure if it will be useful but am happy to share!	Feb 25
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	jake, me (3)	folder created - yes- ill be here- cu soon On Mon, Feb 24, 2014 at 1:32 PM, Laura Schiffer <schlifer@mymail.vcu.edu>	Feb 24
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Janelle, me (2)	<a href="#">Follow up</a> Fwd: Boundaries - Hey Laura! Tyler took this picture today. It might be good for Cynthia's section (she's the one in the middle)	Feb 24

<input type="checkbox"/>			Follow up	images for Laura (schlifer@mymail.vcu.edu) - I've shared an item with you. images for Laura Google D	Feb 24
<input type="checkbox"/>				HI - I am- I have some to send u Borndal.com On Feb 24, 2014, at 1:06 PM, Laura Schlifer <schlifer@	Feb 24
<input type="checkbox"/>				1 File from Janelle: JPRresearch.zip - haha thanks Cynthia took that one. Cool! she's supposed to have some sketc	Feb 23
<input type="checkbox"/>				[VCU FileDrop] Incoming File(s) - Haha I thought you would like the chipotle napkin- it was a hit during the project p	Feb 23
<input type="checkbox"/>				AwayFromTheLight.jpg, MyDouble22.jpg + 7 more items (schlifer@mymail.vcu.edu) - I've shared some items with	Feb 23
<input type="checkbox"/>			Follow up	Hello Photo! - Hi Cynthia, I just wanted to check in with you to see if you're still interested in contributing @	Feb 21
<input type="checkbox"/>			Follow up	Interview/ Q and A - Not a problem...!!I'll peek around downstairs around 12:30 just to check, but I am fle	Feb 17
<input type="checkbox"/>				An introduction - Hah, they can be as sketchy as you'd like! I have no specific number of "things"	Feb 16
<input type="checkbox"/>				Hello! An introduction + a question - Carlton, Thank you so much for your note. I've been able to get a good respon @	Feb 7
<input type="checkbox"/>				heeeeey! a question for you ladies - cool. I will be around after 2 when i meet with steve till the lecture.... On Wed, F@	Feb 6
<input type="checkbox"/>				Hello! An introduction + a question - Stephen, Thanks so much for the reply. I'll contact your students for more infor	Feb 4
<input type="checkbox"/>				Hello! An introduction + a question - I'll see what I can do. Andrea Vail 336.972.8206 www.andreavail.com On Feb : @	Feb 3
<input type="checkbox"/>				Hello! A question - yep. those are just our second years. On Sun, Feb 2, 2014 at 5:59 PM, Laura Schlifer <schlifer@	Feb 2
<input type="checkbox"/>				Hello! An introduction + a question - No problem—thank you again! On Sun, Feb 2, 2014 at 4:15 PM, hilary wilder <	Feb 2
<input type="checkbox"/>				Hello! An introduction + a question - Jamie, Here's the email chain. Headsmack for using "wordy." Forwarded @	Feb 2
<input type="checkbox"/>				Hello! An Introduction + a question - Sasha, Thank you! I'm hoping I can make it work. Best, Laura On Fri, Jan 31, : @	Feb 1
<input type="checkbox"/>				Hello! An introduction + a question - Pam, Thanks for the help! Have a great weekend, Laura On Fri, Jan 31, 2014 : @	Jan 31
<input type="checkbox"/>				Hello! An introduction + a question - Arnold, Thank you! Have a great weekend, Laura On Fri, Jan 31, 2014 at 3:32 @	Jan 31

Conversations with other graduate students and faculty developed early in the project via email

MISSOURI BOTANICAL GARDEN  
GEORGE ENGELMANN PAPERS  
MISSOURI BOTANICAL GARDEN  
GEORGE ENGELMANN PAPERS





From: jake borndal  
<jake.borndal@gmail.com>  
Date: Feb 24, 2014  
Subject: Folder Created

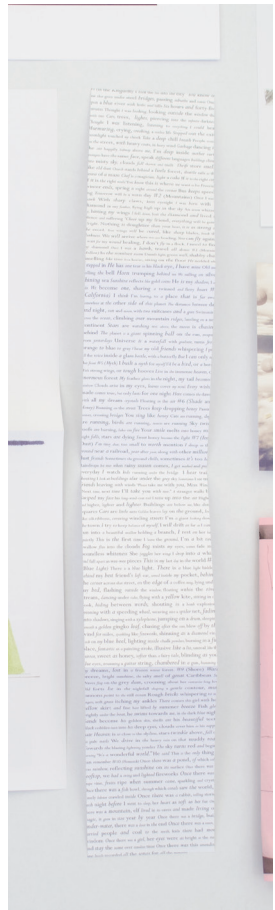
i put a couple of  
drawings in there-plus  
a video that I keep  
returning to-maybe you  
could use a few stills  
from that

i can put some more in  
there-like everyone this  
week is crazy-ill try  
and get some more sourc-  
es to you-let me kow if  
i had mentioned anything  
specific that you want-  
also the text drawings  
look really great if you  
zoom way in, maybe even  
if the full phrase is  
not clear

thanks again

In the end, I received contributions from seventeen students from all seven departments exhibiting in the MFA show, ranging from sketches, poetry, visual research, to photographs of studio spaces. Working with this myriad of content, I began to focus on the design of the format for each submission. The project offered a unique challenge: as designers, we are frequently given content by a client with the intention of creating a specific representation, but in this case, I was given content by others with no set required output from any of the contributors. Therefore, I wanted to be sensitive to their relationship to the work they contributed, while still pushing the design of the formats. Information gleaned from studio visits, and in-person and email conversations with each of the artists helped shape the design; I made subjective decisions based on inherent parameters of form and references made by the contributors. A scanned napkin sketch morphed into the sketch being letterpressed onto napkins; an email about “zooming way in” on an image led to a poster-sized image, cut up to make the full phrase “not clear.”





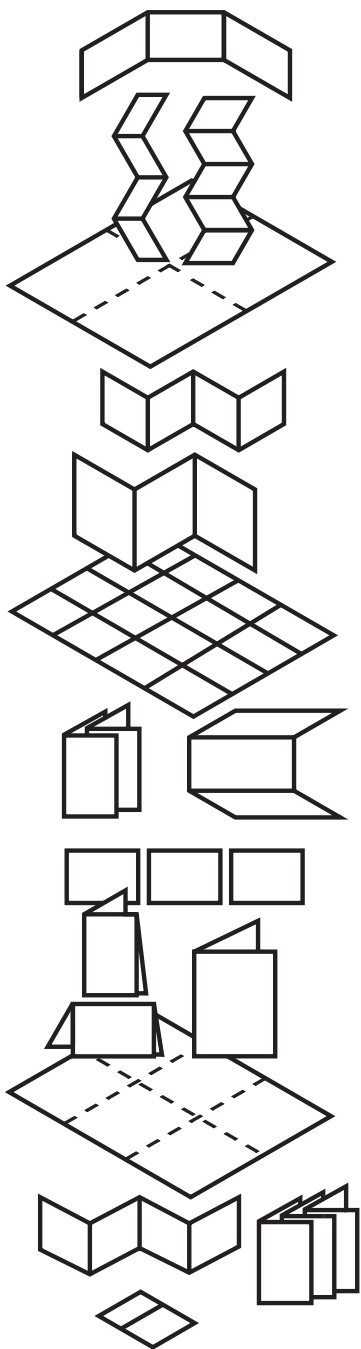


Creating an environment that encouraged participation from gallery attendees was a challenge, since the people attending the MFA show would be a broader and more diverse group than I had worked with in the past. However, after facilitating many participatory projects, I learned that the larger the participant group, the more simplified the call for participation must be. Therefore, I needed to have very few, if any, instructions at the exhibition for the participant.

To facilitate attendees' understanding that they were to assemble their own collection of material, I designed a table with built-in display shelves along the side. The table, built in rough plywood, echoed the unfinished nature of the project. The entire project was laid out on the top of the table, while quantities of each individual piece were made available on the shelves below. The slanted shelves presented the pieces that invited users to take as many or as few as they liked. Empty envelopes sat on the table near the entrance of the gallery, with a card in each envelope explaining both the project, and the participant's role in the creation of the publication.

The state of being *in-progress* implies a fixed and finite direction. To be *in-process*, however, is to situate oneself in the middle of a rhizome — to continually travel between multiple points of connection. This project celebrates this nebulous state, with works-in-process contributed by exhibiting graduate artists and designers at VCUarts. The resulting publication is a series of unfixed points whose connections are made by you, the participant. Please take, shuffle, re-arrange, and build your own publication.

Above: Card with project explanation and instructions placed in each envelope



Since each contribution utilized a different format, I created an index that paired the artist or designer with an icon of their piece of the publication. The image was used also used as a vinyl sticker and as part of the name tags to further emphasize the variation of formats for each individual.













During the exhibition opening, I gathered qualitative data by listening to and observing participants' interaction with the project. Though the idea of creating a table structure came out of the necessity of being in a small space with several exhibitors, it aided in the visitor's understanding of the piece. By having the ability to walk around and crouch down, the participants were given time to observe and absorb before interacting. As a result, the piece became much more physical. While envelopes with the instructions were placed at the corner closest to the entrance of the gallery, many people initially ignored them—instead walking around and looking at the top and sides, eventually making their way back to the beginning. Only then did most people see the envelopes and instructions, read the text, and begin constructing their own publication. This initial sense of confusion gave way to a sense of satisfaction—many times there was an audible “Oh!” after participants read the text.

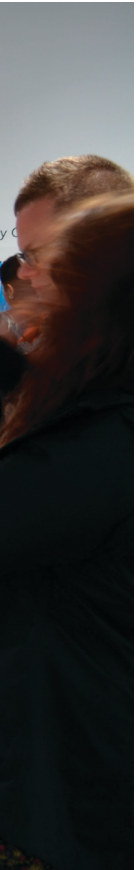
Seeing the users' sense of confusion in the beginning was disconcerting, but eventually, I observed that this momentary confusion became more valuable; many people who began by reading the instructions walked away without looking at the rest of the project, whereas those who began by walking around, looking, and then reading the instructions ended up participating. A larger group of people became interested in the project when they saw others participating, but when there was no one else around, it took a while longer for someone to rekindle the interaction. Though I appreciated seeing the satisfaction once a participant figured out their role in the project, I could have made the instructions a little more explicit to make the project more widely and clearly understood.



## Evaluation

Throughout this process, determining successful and unsuccessful aspects of my projects depended on two main criteria: generating participation and my role as a designer in the process. The first revolves around how much the audience was able to transform from receivers into active participants—to have the ability to add, change, or alter any of the content or form during the process. Of the series of creative projects, the only project that was unsuccessful in this aspect was *MONO*—while a pre-determined group of people became contributors, the audience remained passive.

The second criteria comes from my role as a designer, and where it was inserted into the process. Success in this facet came from using myself as a filter—to receive input and be able to shape it in some way. The Rick Griffith Poster and *In-Process* exemplifies my role most successfully; I was able to insert myself at different moments of the process that allowed me to work directly with users' input in some way.





*“The designer is [...] the artist of tomorrow.  
Not because he is a genius, but because he works  
in such a way as to re-establish contact between  
art and the public.”*

Bruno Munari

## Conclusions

In a recent lecture at the Walker Art Center, artist and designer Martine Syms claimed, "I work in the margins; I privilege my ignorance."<sup>8</sup> Ignorance allows for the freedom to work on the fringes of a discipline, to examine it from the outside without getting weighed down by existing disciplinary methodologies. Coming to the Visual Communications MFA program from an architectural background, I had very little knowledge about the theory and practice of graphic design. However, after two years of exploration I began to understand the value of approaching a new field as an outsider. This approach afforded me the opportunity to develop my relationship to design with a different perspective. This perspective led me to use graphic design as a tool to investigate its own practice—namely the relationship between designer and audience, utilizing the designed object as my method of examination.

8. Martine Syms,  
Walker Insights Lecture Series

Entering the program being more comfortable as a member of the audience for graphic design, but now firmly situated in the world of the designer, I wondered how I could utilize this new role critically. During this time, I developed an approach to my budding practice that heavily relies on, and celebrates, the audience as an active participant in the design process. This outlook afforded me the opportunity to examine the potential value for opening up the creation of designed objects. Shifting the genesis of form and content to the participant allowed me to more closely examine the design of the framework.

Although I have become fully engaged in this new role, I am still only in the very beginning stages of exploring the potential for the designer-as-facilitator. I see my work throughout this process as continuous, with each project attempting to improve upon aspects of my previous work. Therefore, of my creative projects initiated during the MFA program, my final project, *In-Process*, most comprehensively manifests my ideas surrounding facilitation, participation, and flexibility in designed objects. The final outcome acts more like a collage than a publication—the framework for this project allows for an elastic object that the audience puts together using material contributed by others. The hand of the designer is quiet, but not silent. This might imply that the project and myself act more as a service offered to the artists who contributed content, but I believe that they equally served me in facilitating my idea. Through this exchange, inter-departmental relationships were created, sparking a dialogue between design and fine arts in the School of the Arts.

In *Design As Art*, Bruno Munari states, “What then, is this thing called Design if it is neither style nor applied art? It is planning: the planning as objectively as possible of everything that goes to make up the surroundings and atmosphere in which men live today...It is planning done without preconceived notions of style, attempting only to give each thing its logical structure and proper material, and in consequence its logical form”<sup>9</sup>. Critiques have often revolved around the idea of the absence of “me” in my work. Though this critique is valid, and fuels my search to find a balance between the designer’s hand and audience’s input, the focus of my work questions current relationships between designer and audience. Therefore, the “me” in my work is based on initiation and facilitation, rather than an authored result.

9. Munari, *Design as Art*, 35.

While I have begun to establish my design role as a facilitator, I do not necessarily propose this position as a definitive alternative to the practice of graphic design. Instead, I find that incorporating this approach can affect one's wider practice, shifting one's thinking from the creation of formal visual decisions to designing the invisible architecture of the framework. In turn, this thinking leads to objects that are more open-ended, promoting formations over forms. The design of the object itself can be considered more of a rhizomatic development, held together by an invisible structure.



*Forms of Inquiry* exhibit at IASPIS  
(International Artists Studio  
Program in Sweden)

Lastly, as I become rooted in the design discipline, I question how I can maintain a position on the periphery. Because the conversation I fostered between myself and other graduate students became more personal than disciplinary, it became the first step to introducing an interdisciplinary exchange in the School of the Arts. While talking to some of the artists for *In-Process*, a few had interesting, but somewhat misguided perceptions of designers— such as being anti-intellectual and only designing logos. I had my own misconceptions about many other disciplines as well. A more fruitful discussion and greater exchange between other fields would unearth alternative ways to think about the design discipline, and to expose design to other fields. Exhibitions like *Forms of Inquiry* shed light on the ever increasing overlap between the practices of graphic design and architecture, highlighting graphic designers whose work explores the dissolving lines between the two disciplines. Perhaps the best way for design to examine itself today is to operate within what Katya García-Antón calls a state of “disciplinary porosity,”<sup>10</sup> traversing through and between other practices.

10. García-Antón, *Wouldn't It Be Nice...Wishful Thinking in Art and Design*, 62.

## Selected Bibliography

BARTHES, ROLAND, AND STEPHEN HEATH. “The Death of the Author.” In *Image, Music, Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

In this essay, Barthes argues that a work and its author are unrelated—that is to say, the meaning of a work should not be judged based on aspects of the author’s identity.

BENJAMIN, WALTER. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In *Illuminations*. 1st ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968. 217-251.

Benjamin argues that a work of art loses its “aura,” or authenticity, in the process of reproduction; by removing its context and history, the original meaning of a piece is lost.

BIL’AK, PETER. “Graphic Design in the White Cube” by Peter Bil’ak. *Typotheque*. [https://www.typotheque.com/articles/graphic\\_design\\_in\\_the\\_white\\_cube](https://www.typotheque.com/articles/graphic_design_in_the_white_cube).

This essay accompanied the exhibit *Graphic Design in the White Cube*, which addresses the problem of the lack of context in exhibiting graphic design. The essay helped form the basis of my final creative project.

BLAUVELT, ANDREW. “Ghost in the Machine: Distributing Subjectivity.” In *Conditional Design Workbook*. Ed: Maurer, Luna, Jonathan Puckey, Roel Wouters, Edo Paulus. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2013. iii–vi.

Blauvelt’s essay addresses the relationship of subjectivity in design, and how the design of the program or process for generating design allows for limitless possibilities unencumbered by the the subjectivity of the designer.

BLAUVELT, ANDREW. “Towards Relational Design.” *Design Observer*. <http://observatory.designobserver.com/entry.html?entry=7557>

This article argues that design is now in a third phase of design, shifting from a visual language rooted in form to a new pragmatic language based in context, and was incredibly helpful as an introduction to the term “Relational Design.”

BLAUVELT, ANDREW. "Towards Relational Design." *The Gradient*. <http://blogs.walkerart.org/design/2008/11/10/towards-relational-design/> (accessed October 10, 2013).

Additional content to the article of the same name submitted to *Design Observer*; includes additional imagery and examples to further his argument.

DAVIES, COLIN, AND MONIKA PARRINDER. *Limited Language: Rewriting Design—Responding to a Feedback Culture*. Basel: Birkhauser Verlag, 2010.

This project looks at how text can provide a feedback loop between different platforms and media. Utilizing a blog format to develop a dynamic relationship to language, the authors cut, paste, recycle, and re-sample text as a method to arrive at new ideas about visual communication.

DAVIS, DOUGLAS. "The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction." *Leonardo* 28, no. 5 (1995): 381-386.

In response to Benjamin's similarly titled essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Davis argues that because of the ease of digital reproduction, there is no clear distinction between original and reproductions. Thus, the aura transferred to the individuated copy.

ERICSON, MAGNUS. *The Reader: Iaspis Forum on Design and Critical Practice*. Stockholm: IASPIS, 2009.

This book revolves around a broad discussion about design and trans-boundary practice. This book has been influential in my thinking about my future as a designer, reaching across disciplines to investigate my own.

GERRITZEN, MIEKE. *Everyone is a Designer: Manifest for the Design Economy*. 3rd ed. Amsterdam: Bis Publishers, 2001.

A short book of slogans and maxims, this text addresses the tool of the computer as democratization of the design field; because of the computer, everyone is a designer of his or her digital domain.

GERRITZEN, MIEKE, GEERT LOVINK, AND MINKE KAMPMAN. *I Read Where I Am: Exploring New Information Cultures*. Amsterdam: Valiz with Graphic Design Museum, 2011.

A compilation of 82 short reflections on the future of reading, and the forms it may take. Due to the influx of information culture into reading culture, new forms of reading emerge; bombarded by text and image, readers sift through the information to create their own experience. This book was helpful in formulating my ideas about open-ended work.

MC LUHAN, MARSHALL, AND QUENTIN FIORE. *The Medium Is the Massage*. Corte Madera: Gingko Press, 2001.

*The Medium Is the Massage* was crucial for my work in establishing that the medium through which a message is transmitted is more powerful in communication than the message itself.

MOD, CRAIG. "Books in the Age of the iPad." Craig Mod. [http://craigmod.com/journal/ipad\\_and\\_books/](http://craigmod.com/journal/ipad_and_books/).

This article discusses that the emergence of e-books will produce better designed physical books by eliminating the necessity of paperbacks, or books with "formless" content; whereas books with definite content, or a combination of design of text and image will remain as cherished objects.

MUNARI, BRUNO. *Design as Art*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1971.

Munari was influential to my way of thinking of the designer's role in society, believing that designers should be fully integrated into society, anonymous and equal to other disciplines. His career was spent questioning design as it existed in the mid-20th century, continually critical of his field.

ROCK, MICHAEL. *Multiple Signatures: On Designers, Authors, Readers and Users*. New York: Rizzoli, 2013.

This collection of essays was helpful in examining different aspects of the design practice; covering Authorship, Projects, Criticism, and Readership, the variety of essays helped me develop my own views surrounding these topics.

SCHNAPP, JEFFREY T., AND ADAM MICHAELS. *The Electric Information Age Book: McLuhan/Agel/Fiore and the Experimental Paperback*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012.

This book explores a span during the sixties and seventies when designers worked alongside authors to create meaningfully designed paperback books by using rich graphics alongside verbal content; this shift in book design was due to the introduction of television.

SOULELLIS, PAUL. "Counterpractice." [counterpractice.tumblr.com](http://counterpractice.tumblr.com), 2013. (accessed December 1, 2013).

Originally presented at a conference in Belfast, Soulellis' slides for the lecture (in the form of a tumblr) became extremely influential developing my idea of designed objects becoming a collection of content sought by the designer and brought in by others. The designer acts as a facilitator, collector, and designer throughout the process.

SYMS, MARTINE. "Martine Syms." Lecture, *Insights Lecture Series* at Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, March 18, 2014.

Syms, an artist, designer, and "conceptual entrepreneur," defines her practice by working on the fringes of a variety of disciplines, using design, film and writing as tools rather than mediums to get her message across. Her use of the discipline-as-tool was especially interesting to me as I think about my future in the design field.





## Acknowledgements

I extend my sincere gratitude to my committee—Jamie Mahoney, Roy McKelvey, and Maia Wright—for their guidance, patience, knowledge, and coffee breaks during this process.

A genuine thank you to Sandy Wheeler, Steven Hoskins, John Malinoski, Nicole Killian, David Shields and the rest of the GDES faculty for helping me build, expand, and challenge my definition of design.

Thank you to all of my classmates, especially James, Sarah, and Hong for support and late-night laughter.

Thank you to my friends near and far for support and encouragement. Thank you, Jon, for your thoughts, critique, and your humor. I couldn't have done this without you.

And finally, I would like to express my thanks to my family, who have no idea what I did for the past two years, but supported me regardless.

