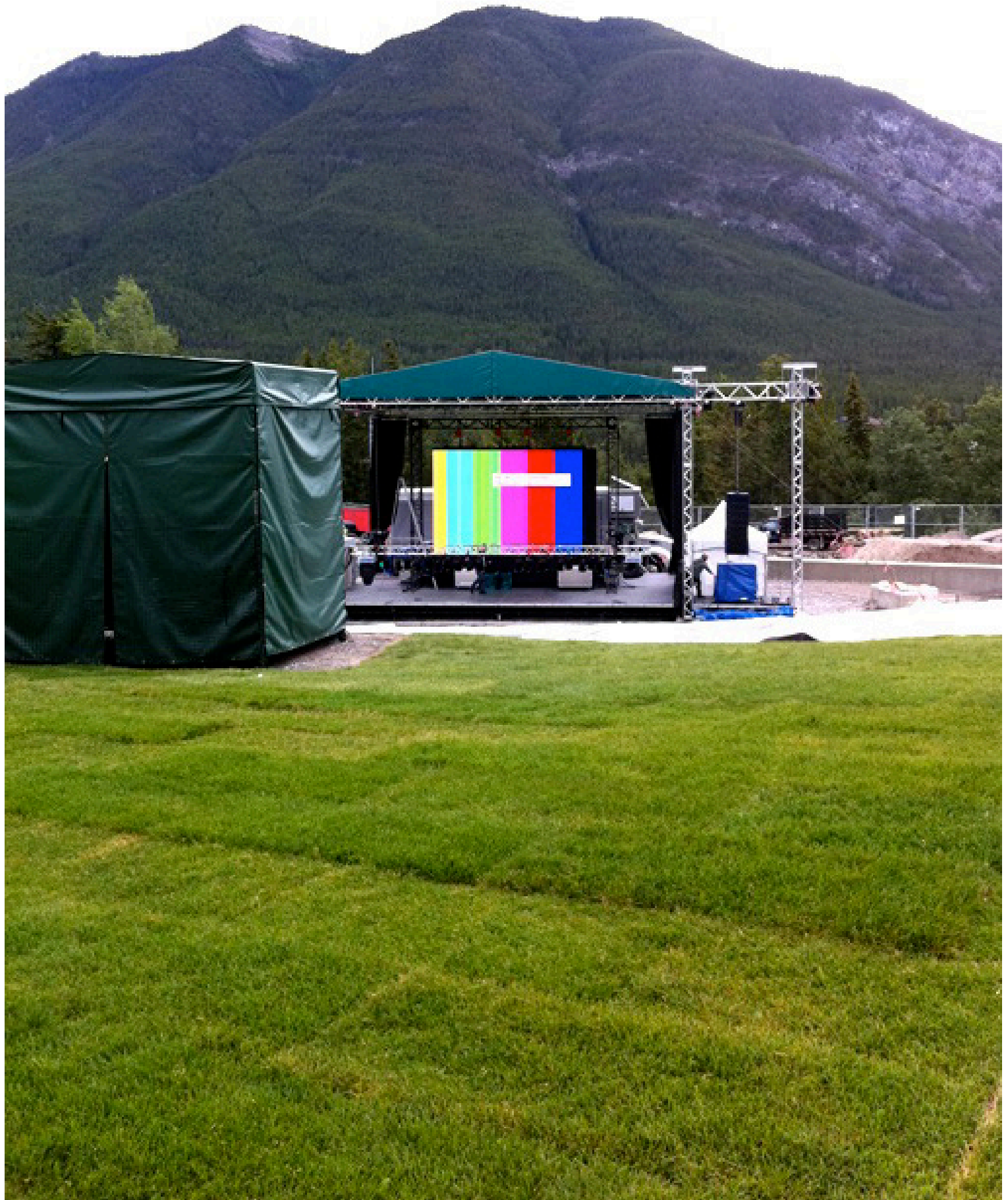Towards a Critical Faculty
(Only an Attitude of Orientation)
From the Toolbox of a Serving Library

Geneaology

The three texts that make up the main body of this book were originally published as individual pamphlets at two-year intervals from around the end of 2006 on.

The first one grew out of my involvement with the Academic Project Office (APO), a lively but short-lived initiative set up at Parsons The New School in New York by Tim Marshall and Lisa Grocott. It was written to be read by the entire Liberal Arts faculty, with the aim of provoking a school-wide discussion. At some point along the way, I decided it ought to become the first of three documents, whose individual titles would join up into one long composite (an idea stolen from the English writer B.S. Johnson). At this point I had no idea what that sentence might be, so I left the first part open-ended enough to allow further clauses to be clipped on later.

Shortly after the APO folded, Marta Kuzma and Pablo Lafuente at the Office of Contemporary Art (OCA) in Oslo invited me to run a short workshop, *On Library, Archive and "Service,"* which was an ideal excuse to squeeze out the second installment.

The last part doubled as a prospectus for a six-week summer school at the Banff Centre in the Canadian Rockies that I programmed together with my colleagues at The Serving Library, Angie Keefer and David Reinfurt, following an invitation from the head of the Centre's Visual Arts deptartment, Kitty Scott. Our idea was to put into practice some of the ideas assembled in the first two pamphlets via a daily series of seminars that would aim to reconsider what a present-day Foundation Course could or should entail.

This last pamphlet also contained a supplementary sheet with short descriptions of the course's weekly components, each written by that component's "teacher" (Angie, David and myself, plus Robert Snowden, Anthony Huberman and Dan Fox). Here they serve as a kind of postscript, along with a letter written to yet another sounding board, Mike Sperlinger, which was mostly a means of reminding myself what had happened during those six dense weeks in the mountains.

The first three parts can therefore be read as kind of theory, and the last two as practice derived from it. Following the founding events in New York, Oslo, and Banff, the pamphlets circulated as freely downloadable PDFs, made available from the "Library' section of www.dextersinister.org. They remain shelved there at the time of writing.

All of which was assembled into the book you hold in your hands by Louise Hold Sidenius in Copenhagen, who approached me with the idea of assembling the parts into a whole using two virtually extinct technologies—an Intertype typesetting machine, and a Heidelberg letterpress machine. This seemed yet another opportunity to embody one of the so-called foundational skills explored in these texts—"experience over convenience." Her generous offer thus keeps this oddly extended set of ideas moving along.

The Italian art critic Germano Celant once wrote: "As soon as this is written it will be full of holes." Rather than revise these texts with the benefit of hindsight, it feels more appropriate to simply restate that they were written at a particular time and place under very specific circumstances. We used markedly different machines to produce the three pamphlets, each with its own limitations (the first had to fit on 8 pages, the second on 6, the last on 4) which had a tangible effect on the writing. The texts are therefore reproduced without significant retouching— the exception being the letter to Mike, which has been extensively retooled in order to reinstate all that was meant to be read between the lines by a close friend.

A bibliography at the end lists all the books and articles quoted, paraphrased, or otherwise referred to throughout.

With thanks to everyone involved in this continuing project. Some of the ideas that emerged may still be useful; most have a habit of changing on a daily basis.

Stuart Bailey, Torino, December 2013

The members of our class went to the art gallery

Towards a Critical Faculty

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A short reader concerned with art/design education
compiled by Stuart Bailey
for the Academic Project Office
at Parsons The New School for Design, New York
Winter 2006–7

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Let me open this slightly odd document by introducing myself through my own art-educational background. I began as an undergraduate student of Typography & Graphic Communication in a rigorous but essentially maverick department at The University of Reading in the UK, then later as something between graduate and apprentice at the familial Werkplaats Typografie [Typography Workshop] in the provincial Netherlands. Since then I have worked across the arts, mainly as a book designer, co-founded and edited a design journal, *Dot Dot Dot*, which continues in an ever-widening cultural vein, and simultaneously taught in the undergraduate departments at both my old Reading course and at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam. After a few years teaching, I recently came to a standstill. I found myself so confused about what and why I was teaching that it seemed better to stop and readdress the point before trying again. Around this time I also found myself involved in countless conversations with friends and colleagues in similar situations with similar feelings, marked less by disillusion and more by confusion. Since then I have been involved in one-off engagements at MIT, SVA, Yale, Art Center and USC, and most recently have ended up as some kind of wild card in Parsons' new-founded Academic Project Office (APO), who are interested in addressing the same concerns. Which is how I come to be attempting to engage you in the process.

A first disclaimer: This document is a loose, fragmented reader designed to circle the area the APO team intends to discuss in subsequent forums, both inside and outside the context of The New School. Because the topic is so broad and quickly overwhelming, it seems most useful by way of introduction to simply assemble my personal collection of other people's thinking on the subject past and present, with a view to the future. This is a brief survey based on resources within easy reach and a few months' worth of casual discussion. It maps the lay of the land as a work-in-progress intended to be amended, added to, and refined. One advantage of this approach is that it ought to remain timely.

A second disclaimer: The entire issue of art/design schooling is infuriatingly elliptical and constantly in danger of canceling itself out. This is, at least in part, because what we might initially perceive to be separable issues (the distinctions between undergraduate and graduate, art and design, teaching and learning, mentor and facilitator, etc.) are all inextricably entwined. Once one is addressed, one or more of the others inevitably come into play. This is why the present document is not particularly subdivided; even its basic chronological divisions barely hold.

Artists and designers (or good ones) are by nature reflexive creatures—they simultaneously reflect on what they do while doing it. As I understand it, the APO was explicitly set up to harness this quality towards a practical end: *to engage its design faculty in actively designing the institution*—a logic that seems as paradoxically rare as it is obvious in contemporary art/design schools. In order to dismantle a few anticipated responses, then: this is not a rooting-out exercise, nor a preamble to a series of job losses (probably the opposite), nor a change for the sake of change, nor some infant generation staking a claim, nor a gratuitous exercise in spending excess money, nor a hollow PR campaign. It simply proposes the time, space and energy to ask the sorts of questions that should be permanently addressed as a matter of course, with the school set up to accommodate

them as and when necessary. In short, to engage our "design thinking" towards consolidating a future curriculum. The principal obstruction to such constructive intentions lies in the disjunct between the academic and financial-bureaucratic divisions of contemporary schools—between projected ideas and "reality." I see no good reason why the two can't be resolved together in a plan that is at once transparent, open and clear.

There are countless routes into thinking about teaching contemporary art/design. Mine is to try to get to the bottom of a term just mentioned, and which is constantly floating around at Parsons: "design thinking." First by questioning the meaning of the phrase itself, which is perhaps the first clue to my background and approach. "Design thinking," to my mind, is a tautology; designing is *synonymous* with thinking ("to conceive or fashion in the mind," according to the dictionary). That said, I understand the implication: "design thinking" (more or less interchangeable with "intelligence" or "expertise") alludes to the field's fundamental mode of approach as distinct from that of other fields, such as "craft thinking," "scientific thinking" or "philosophical thinking."

In my view, then, the key characteristic of "design thinking" can be defined as "reflection-in-action," which Norman Potter further elucidates in his statement:

> Design is a field of concern, response, and enquiry as often as decision and consequence. (Potter, 1989)

The perceived payoff of unpacking "design thinking" is that its constituent qualities can be identified and extracted to provide the new focus of a contemporary art/design curriculum. This follows from the common intuition that existing models are incapable of accommodating the ever-blurring boundaries of art/design disciplines, of specialism giving way to generalism. The idea is that this so-called design thinking is transferable (or "exportable") *across* disciplines, and so students ought to be taught to develop a general *reflexive critical faculty* rather than discipline-specific skills.

Here I propose to consider the pedagogical application of "design thinking" *through my own form of design thinking* ("concern, response, and enquiry"). I will rewind, then pause, then fast-forward, plotting the historical trajectory of art/design education in the hope of identifying how and why past models were set up in response to prevailing social conditions, then articulating why, in light of these legacies, along with an overview of the present paradigm, "design thinking" might indeed be an appropriate foundation for the future. In other words, for the length of this pamphlet at least, I'm giving the idea the benefit of my doubt.

> Who really can face the future? All you can do is project from the past, even when the past shows that such projections are often wrong. And who really can forget the past? What else is there to know? What sort of future is coming up from behind I don't really know. But the past, spread out ahead, dominates everything in sight. (Pirsig, 1974)

Past

What are the extant models of art/design schools? Let's try to compile a lineage starting around a hundred years ago when, in the wake of the industrial revolution, such schools were first set up as discrete entities. The first key distinction was between the traditional master-apprentice model for craft-based professions (metallurgy, carpentry, etc.), and the academy-studio model for fine art training (drawing, painting, etc.)

> The School of Arts and Crafts was set up in 1896 to fill "certain unoccupied spaces in the field of education." The foundation of the School represented an important extension of the design philosophy of the Arts and Crafts

movement which, largely inspired by William Morris, had raised the alarm against the lowering of standards as a result of the mechanization of design processes. Advocating a return to hand-production, this movement argued that the machine was a social evil. The School's first principal believed that "science and modern industry have given the artist many new opportunities" and that "modern civilization rests on machinery and that no system for the encouragement or endowment of the arts can be sound that does not recognize this."

The School proved to be innovatory in both its educational objectives and its teaching methods. "The special object of the School is to encourage the industrial application of decorative design, and it is intended that every opportunity should be given for pupils to study this in relation to their own particular craft. There is no intention that the school should supplant apprenticeship; it is rather intended that it should supplement it by enabling its students to learn design and those branches of their craft which, owing to the sub-division of the processes of production, they are unable to learn in the workshop."

The majority of the staff of the school were not "certificated," full-time teachers; rather were they successful practitioners in their respective crafts, employed on a part-time basis, and providing the school with a great variety of practical skills and invaluable contacts with the professional world of the designer and craftsman. These pioneering innovations in objective and method proved to be crucial to a philosophy of art and design education which fashioned the establishment and development of many similar institutions in Britain and abroad, including the Weimar Bauhaus. (Central School prospectus, London, 1978)

In describing this office and project to other people, I invariably find myself back at the Bauhaus, simply because it remains the most explicit representation of a set of coherent principles and marker of a paradigm shift. Namely: the switch from the traditional master-apprentice to the group-workshop model; the introduction of the foundation course of general principles for all fields; the application of fine art to practical ends; and the synthesis of the arts around one particular vision. Whether these ideas were actually realized or even consistent is irrelevant here; they endure as what the Bauhaus has come to *represent*.

Workshops, not studios, were to provide the basis for Bauhaus teaching. Workshop training was already an important element in the courses offered by several "reformed" schools of arts and crafts elsewhere in Germany, but what was to make the Bauhaus different from anything previously attempted was a tandem system of workshop-teaching. Apprentices were to be instructed not only by "masters' of each particular craft but also by fine artists. The former would teach method and technique, while the latter, working in close cooperation with the craftsmen, would introduce the students to the mysteries of creativity and help them achieve a formal language of their own. (Whitford, 1984)

From here we can then ask: Are art schools in the 21st century still based on the Bauhaus model? If so, is this still relevant almost a century later? If not, on what other model(s) are they based, if at all? If not based on a model, how are they designed, or how do they otherwise come into being? And finally: Whether based on a model or not, should they be?

The old art schools were unable to produce this unity; and how, indeed, should they have done so, since art cannot be taught? Schools must be absorbed by the workshop again.

Our impoverished State has scarcely any funds for cultural purposes any more, and is unable to take care of those who only want to occupy themselves by indulging some minor talent. I foresee that a whole group of you will unfortunately soon be forced by necessity to take up jobs to earn money, and the only ones who will remain faithful to art will be those prepared to go hungry

for it while material opportunities are being reduced, intellectual possibilities have already enormously multiplied. (Gropius, 1919)

And really, following the various subsequent incarnations of the Bauhaus in Germany (and the couple of postwar offshoots in Chicago and Ulm), any sense of an explicit, shared pedagogical ideology tails off here, coinciding with the Second World War and the end of what is generally regarded as the heroic phase of modernism.

I also once dreamed of a school where it would be natural to expect such an intermix of professions, arts and trades. There was some attempt in Lethaby's early ideas for the Central School of Arts & Crafts in London, in Henry vande Velde's and Gropius's Weimar Bauhaus-Hochschule für Gestaltung, and at the Ulm Hochschule für Gestaltung. The two latter did not survive: the Central transformed itself into a School of Art & Design, only distinguishable from many others by some still-surviving tradition, and, as always, everywhere, by occasional concatenations of firing staff & students.

All art schools, until some years ahead, have tried to teach what teachers taught, or else supplied an environment to expand. (And I can't think it very bad to give a human being three or four years of freedom to work out what consequence or nonsense his desires at eighteen/nineteen are; by "his" I include unisex "hers.") The question now is, not only the structure of art education, nor indeed the government reports, but, very strictly, what should we teach, what should they learn; also how can they be educated. There is no way to teach anything except through personal contact and conduct. There is no way to teach any person who lacks desire. There is no way to teach through excessive specialization in an "art" subject, with an iced-on gloss of general-liberal-complementary studies. Because the "subject" and its complement belong together. It should not prove impossible to give the "art" ones jobs …. (Froshaug, 1970)

Through the 1960s and 1970s—and on into postmodernity—the art/design school was increasingly characterized by the creation and popularization of its own image and social codes (bound up with the various facets of youth liberation, its movements and nascent culture). This was school conceived as a liberal annex and breeding ground, but whose by-product was the acceleration of animosity towards the so-called Real World of business.

The art school has evolved through a repeated series of attempts to gear its practice to trade and industry to which the schools themselves have responded with a dogged insistence on spontaneity, on artistic autonomy, on the need for independence, on the power of the arbitrary gesture. Art as free practice versus art as a response to external demand: the state and the art market define the problem, the art school modernizes, individualizes, adds nuance to the solution.

Art school students are marginal, in class terms, because art, particularly fine art, is marginal in cultural terms. Constant attempts to reduce the marginality of art education, to make art and design more "responsive" and "vocational" by gearing them towards industry and commerce have confronted the ideology of "being an artist," the romantic vision which is deeply embedded in the art school experience. Even as pop stars, art students celebrate the critical edge marginality allows, turning it into a sales technique, a source of celebrity. (Frith/Horne, 1987)

The following account was written by a student towards the end of this era—a typically convoluted attempt to deal with the contradictions of lingering socialist ideals amid burgeoning social liberation and commercialization:

I am trying to learn to be a designer. Designers are directly concerned with life. Designs are for living. Designing is just part of the process in which solar

energy lives through the medium of hereditary information. Designers are concerned with information— information which furthers life. Being a designer is finding out ways of furthering life. Not thermodynamicsmechanics life, this is being a doctor, a servant purely. Emotion-communion life. How you check a design: does it make its user more alive? Or his children maybe? We have to work in time also.

Here is a problem for the designer, one to beat his head against. Clients usually ask him to operate the other way—against life—the clients I have come across. They ask him usually to make a design for part of a system for making a profit. Making a profit is life, sure, but for the client only. And it may be the client the designer is working for, but it is people he is working on. The client doesn't sit down and read all his 50,000 leaflets, people do. The client pays, but the designer must be ready to tear up his cheq-ues if he or other people he loves don't or won't get the money, and if the client is trying to use him to channel life away from other people. The designer is working on people: he is working for people.

The designer may have to work for clients whose business is drainage of this kind. But not if he can survive without. If he has to, he must never forget what they are doing, and what they are doing to him, what they are asking him to do to other people. If he forgets this for a moment, they may start draining him. There must be people who are working for people. He can work for them. Then he will be a real designer, designing for life, not death.

How? I don't know yet, that's why I go to school, to experience, to share experience with those to whom these problems are no longer new and with those to whom their very newness is an opportunity for living. (Bridgman, 1969)

Present

—and this is the same writer forty years on:

We were wrong. That old article tells you why: rational design would only work for rational people, and such people do not exist. Real people have irrational needs, many of them to do with human tribalism. Though tribalism itself is rational—it increases your chances of survival—its totems are not. If you belong to the coal-effect tribe, you've got to have a coal-effect fire. There's no reason for wanting your heat source this shape, other than the fact that other tribe members do. There's no reason for having a modernist, post-modernist, minimalist or any other source of heat source, either, except as a similar totem. The reasons have to be tacked on later (but only if you are a member of the rationalist tribe—nobody else bothers).

So designers can't rule the world, they can only make it more like it already is. Fortunately (or unfortunately if you're a hard-line rationalist) the world is not any kind of coherent entity, so "like it already is" can mean many different things—just choose your tribe and go for it. This can give a satisfying illusion of control, despite the strict limits imposed by tribal convention. Because many tribes have novelty as one of their totems, it is possible to change—"redesign"—some of the other totems at regular intervals. Once confined to the clothing industry, this kind of programmed totemic change now extends to goods of all kinds: "fashion designers" have become just "designers."

Such designers—the ones who design "designer" goods—have apparently achieved a measure of control over the wider public. It seems, according to one TV commercial I have seen, that they can even make people ashamed to be seen with the wrong mobile phone—a kind of shame that can only have meaning within a designer-led tribal context. The old, Marxist-centralist kind of designer didn't care whether people felt shame or anything else. He or she simply knew what was "best" in some absolute sense, and strove to make industry

apply this wisdom. But "designer" designers work the other way around. Far from wanting to control their commercial masters, they enthusiastically share their belief that the public, because of its irrepressible tribal vanities, is there to be milked. They have capitulated in a way that my [previous] article fervently hoped they would not, but for the reason that is pointed out: in visual matters there is no "one best way." Exploiting this uncertainty is what today's design business is all about. The old, idealistic modernism that I once espoused is on the scrap heap.

So my naive idea of the 1960s—that designers were part of the solution to the world's chaotic uncontrollability— was precisely the wrong way round. Today's designers have emerged from the back room of purist, centralist control to the brightly lit stage of public totem-shaping. Seen from the self-same Marxist viewpoint that I espoused in those ancient days, they are now visible as part of the problem, not the solution. They have overtly accepted their role as part of capitalism. Designers are now exposed, not as saviours of the planet but as an essential part of the global machinery of production and consumption. (Bridgman, 2002)

Thierry de Duve has identified and calibrated the component qualities of three fundamental paradigms that *underly* models on which art schools have been defined: the ACADEMY, the BAUHAUS, and what I propose to simply call the CONTEMPORARY.

The ACADEMY describes the pre-modernist period roughly up until the First World War. It is based on the idea of students possessing unique *talent* specific to a discipline. It is taught through the education of *technique*, abiding a historical chain of development. And its method of teaching is by *imitation*, involving the reproduction of sameness in view of continuing and developing a particular discipline.

The BAUHAUS, by comparison, describes the period roughly between WWI and WWII. It can be considered modernist inasmuch as it explicitly breaks from predominantly romantic or classical ways of working and thinking, and remains the foundation of most art/design schools in existence today —"often subliminally, almost unconsciously … more or less amended, more or less debased," according to De Duve. It is based on the idea of students possessing a general *creativity* that spans disciplines. It is taught through the education of a *medium* as an autonomous entity, without emphasizing its lineage. And its method of teaching is by *invention*, involving the production of otherness and novelty. As such, it emphasizes formalism.

The CONTEMPORARY describes the prevailing condition which, although *underlying* the art/design world as a paradigm equivalent to (yet distinct from) the previous two, has yet to yield widespread collective change in the way its schools are constructed. Present-day ideas tend to be poured into the existing Bauhaus container, but they no longer fit. Calibrated in line with the other models, the contemporary tendency holds that students possess a general *attitude* that spans disciplines. It is taught through the education of a *practice* through which this attitude is articulated. And its method of teaching is by *deconstruction*, involving the analysis of a work's constituent parts. Although the term "desconstruction" is open to misunderstanding in light of its various common formal associations (particularly in Architecture), I prefer to keep De Duve's chart intact and emphasize that his "deconstruction" refers to the intellectual unpacking, dismantling, and reading of a given piece of work.

ACADEMY	BAUHAUS	CONTEMPORARY
talent	creativity	attitude
technique	medium	practice
imitation	invention	deconstruction

The back-end of this period—which brings us roughly up to date—has been further marked and marred, of course, by the

propagation of school as business, student as customer, and all the attendant bureaucracy that instigates the ever-increasing gap between actual pedagogy and its marketed image.

> Accreditation is an attempt to communicate to the world that we know and agree on what the truth is. But no school ever believes in the generic principles it must appear to endorse to be accredited. Those who draft these supposedly shared principles are not those known for their creativity or their knowledge of the history of the art they are trying to protect. Accreditation processes are universally discredited yet ever more intrusive. Kafka as the descendant of Vitruvius. (Wigley, 2005)

The fraying of any coherent consensus since the Bauhaus, further confused by the fact that policies are increasingly determined by schools' financial departments rather than academic ones, has resulted in a largely part-time generation of itinerant teaching staff who lack the opportunities (time, energy, resources, community, encouragement, inclination) to engage in theoretical or philosophical grounding, while—as far I can see—*needing and wanting one*.

Now, if we accept all this as given and zoom out of the specific focus on schools for a moment, let's try to summarize those current social conditions directly related to art and design, on which we might found a new protocol.

Alain Findeli defines the contemporary paradigm—"shared beliefs according to which our educational, political, technological, scientific, legal and social systems function"—as comprising three key characteristics: Materialism, Positivism, and Agnosticism. He then lists the morbid tendencies of the sort of design culture that currently flourishes under such preconditions:

> The effect of product engineering and marketing on design, i.e., the determinism of instrumental reason, and central role of the economic factor as the almost exclusive evaluation criterion.
>
> An extremely narrow philosophical anthropology which leads one to consider the user as a mere customer or, at best, as a human being framed by ergonomics and cognitive psychology.
>
> An outdated implicit epistemology of design practice and intelligence, inherited from the nineteenth century.
>
> An overemphasis upon the material product; an aesthetics based almost exclusively on material shapes and qualities.
>
> A code of ethics originating in a culture of business contracts and agreements; a cosmology restricted to the marketplace.
>
> A sense of history conditioned by the concept of material progress.
>
> A sense of time limited to the cycles of fashion and technological innovations or obsolescence.

Having mapped these bleak circumstances, he then asks:

> What could be an adequate purpose for the coming generations? Obviously, the environmental issue should be a central concern. But the current emphasis on the degradation of our biophysical environment tends to push another degradation into the background, that of the social and cultural environments, i.e. of the human condition. (Findeli, 2001)

—and suggests that one key appropriate shift, already underway, is precisely that of dematerialization, away from a "product-centered attitude." This implies the end of the product-as-work-of-art, heroic gesture, genius mentality and fetishism of the artifact. A more appropriate approach would focus more on the human *context* of the design "problem"; it would emphasize the design of services—whether post offices, hospitals, web providers, or indeed school bureaucracies—rather than material products; and in the face of overproduction and planned obsolescence, the systems that supplant the "vanishing product" would be approbated on sustainable, ecological grounds.

Let's counteract this material depression with the optimistic abstraction of Italo Calvino's set of lectures, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*—a concise inventory of contemporary qualities and values that he proposed ought to be carried over the threshold of 2000 (written about 15 years in advance). These lectures directly referred to literature, specifically the continuing value of the novel, and as such consist mainly in examples drawn from a gamut of high-flown literary history from Lucretius to Perec. The qualities are, however, easily transposed across disciplines, and thus exemplify both "design thinking" and at least three of Calvino's themes (lightness, quickness, multiplicity).

To summarize, Calvino first propagates LIGHTNESS, describing the necessity of the facility to "change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification." He cites Milan Kundera's conception of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in desirable opposition to the reality of the *Ineluctable Weight of Living*, and draws a parallel with the two industrial revolutions, between the lightness of "bits" of information travelling along circuits and the heaviness of wrought iron machinery. The second quality, QUICKNESS, summarizes economy of expression, agility, mobility and ease. He quotes Galileo's notion that "discoursing is like coursing"—reasoning is like racing—and that "For him good thinking means ... agility in reason, economy in argument and ... imaginative examples." The third is EXACTITUDE, as opposed to the "plague afflicting language, revealing itself as a loss of cognition and immediacy, an automatism that tends to level out all expression into the most generic, anonymous and abstract formulas, to dilute meanings, to blunt the edge of expressiveness ...." While Calvino admits that precision and definition of intent are obvious qualities to support, he argues that the contemporary ubiquity of language used in a random, approximate, careless manner, is extreme enough to warrant the reminder. Next comes VISIBILITY, in which the author tackles the slippery nature of imagination, particularly the difference between image and word as the primary source of *imag*ination, and whether imagination as such might be considered foremost either an "instrument of knowledge" or "identification with the world soul." Alongside these two definitions, Calvino offers a third: "the imagination as a repertory of what is potential, what is hypothetical ... the power of bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut, of bringing both forms and colours from the lines of black letters of a white page, and in fact *thinking* in terms of images." Finally, MULTIPLICITY refers to "the idea of an open encyclopedia, an adjective that certainly contradicts the noun *encyclopedia*, which etymologically implies an attempt to exhaust knowledge of the world by circumscribing it, but today we can no longer think in terms of a totality that is not potential, conjectural, and manifold." This fifth memo promotes perhaps the most obvious of contemporary tropes, the network. The sixth, CONSISTENCY, was unrealized at the time of Calvino's death.

Throughout his attempt to grasp his precise relationship to these nascent traits, Calvino constantly invokes polar opposites. The most memorable and profound of these is the dualism of *syntony* and *focalization*—active participation in the world versus constructive meditation *on* it. The struggle to balance the two, he says, is prerequisite for the creation of culture. Brian Eno has proposed that it's more profitable to think in terms of continuums, greyscales, or axes *between* concepts than the usual binary poles (whether Neat vs. Shaggy hairstyles, Capitalism vs. Communism, or Us vs. Them):

> Let's start here: "culture" is everything we don't have to do. We have to eat, but we don't have to have "cuisines," Big Macs or Tournedos Rossini. We have to cover

ourselves against the weather, but we don't have to be so concerned as to whether we put on Levi's or Yves Saint-Laurent. We have to move about the face of the globe, but we don't have to dance. These other things, we choose to do. We could survive if we chose not to.

I call the "have-to" activities functional and the "don't-have-to"s stylistic. By "stylistic" I mean that the main basis on which we make choices between them is in terms of their stylistic differences. Human activities distribute them on a long continuum from the functional (being born, eating, crapping and dying) to the stylistic (making abstract paintings, getting married, wearing elaborate lace underwear, melting silver foil onto our curries).

The first thing to note is that the whole bundle of stylistic activities is exactly what we would describe as "a culture": what we use to distinguish individuals and groups from each other. We do not say of cultures "They eat," but "They eat very spicy foods" or "They eat raw meat." A culture is the sum of all the things about which humanity can choose to differ—all the things by which people can recognize each other as being voluntarily distinguished from each other.

But there seem to be two words involved here: culture, the package of behaviors-about-which-we-have-a-choice, and Culture, which we usually take to mean art, and which we tend to separate as an activity. I think these are connectable concepts: big-C Culture is in fact the name we reserve for one end of the FUNCTIONAL/STYLISTIC continuum—for those parts of it that are particularly and conspicuously useless, specifically concerned with style. As the spectrum merges into usefulness, we are inclined to use the words "craft" or "design," and to accord them less status, and as it merges again into pure instinctual imperative we no longer use the word "culture" at all. From now onwards, when I use the word "culture" I am using it indiscriminately to cover the whole spectrum of activities excluding the "imperative" end. And perhaps that gives us a better name for the axes of this spectrum: "imperative" and "gratuitous"—things you have to do versus things you could choose not to do. (Eno, 1996)

I'd contend, then, that what ought to preoccupy entire faculties as well as individual teachers, is understanding where on this sliding scale they exist—then working out where they *should* exist. Ought their teaching be oriented more towards small-c culture or big-C Culture? I don't mean to insinuate a simplistic, reductive value judgement, but consider these two inventories:

There are many roles for designers even within a given sector of professional work. A functional classification might be: *Impresarios*: those who get work, organize others to do it, and present the outcome. *Culture diffusers*: those who do competent work effectively over a broad field, usually from a stable background of dispersed interests. *Culture generators*: obsessive characters who work in back rooms and produce ideas, often more use to other designers than the public. *Assistants*: often beginners, but also a large group concerned with administration and draughtsmanship. *Parasites*: those who skim off the surface of other people's work and make a good living by it. (Potter, 1969)

and:

Every one of them does many things well but one best: Each represents an archetype who builds a culture of creativity in a specific way. There is *The Talent Scout*, who hires the über-best and screens ideas at warp speed. *The Feeder*, who stimulates people's minds with a constant supply of new trends and ideas. *The Mash-up Artist*, who tears down silos, mixes people up, and brings in outside change agents. *The Ethnographer*, who studies human behavior across cultures and searches for unspoken desires that can be met with new products. *The Venture Capitalist*, who generates a diversified portfolio of promising ideas that translate into new products and services. (Conlin, 2006)

While both seem to reasonably summarize the roles that could usefully inform contemporary design (or "communication" or whatever) courses, and the sort of specializations that might replace traditional streaming, it's worth pointing out that the rhetoric and attitude of the first is geared towards *accommodating* demand, concerned with some vestige of *imperative* needs while that of the second is geared towards *creating demand*, which doesn't pretend to fulfill anything other than *gratuitous* needs. In other words, the former attempts to maintain (big-C) Constructive principles, while the latter is resolutely resigned to (small-c) commodification. Again: consider where on the axis we currently stand, and where might we reasonably slide to—on both practical and ethical terms.

Future

If students [teachers] feel blocked by society as it is, then they must help find constructive ways forward to a better one. In a personal way, the question must be answered by individual students [teachers] in their own terms, but as far as design goes, it is possible to see two slippery snakes in the snakes and ladders game. The first snake is to suppose that the future is best guaranteed by trying to live in it; and the second is an assumption that must never go unexamined—that the required tools of method and technique are more essential than spirit and attitude. This snake offers a sterility that reduces the most "correct" procedures to a pretentious emptiness, whether in education or in professional practice. The danger is reinforced by another consideration. There can be a certain hollowness of accomplishment known to a student [teacher] in his own heart, but which he is obliged to disown, and to mask with considerations of tomorrow, merely to keep up with the pressures surrounding him. Apart from the success-criteria against which his work may be judged, there is a more subtle and pervasive competitiveness from which it is difficult to be exempt, even by the most sophisticated exercises in detachment. Hence the importance of recognizing that education is a fluid and organic growth of understanding, or it is nothing. Similarly, when real participation is side-stepped, and education is accepted lovelessly as a handout, then reality can seem progressively more fraudulent.

Fortunately, the veriest beginner can draw confidence from the same source as a seasoned design specialist, once it is realized that the foundations of judgement in design, and indeed the very structure of decision, are rooted in ordinary life and in human concerns, not in some quack professionalism with a degree as a magic key to the mysteries. From then on, to keep the faith, to keep open to the future, is to know the present as a commitment in depth, and to know the past where its spirit can still reach us. (Potter, 1969)

With all this in mind, can we rethink a curriculum that could realistically address the conditions variously described above (in more or less overlapping ways), fully aware of past attempts, which avoids the easy slide into trite idealism or, equally, marketing rhetoric, and isn't necessarily crowd-pleasing; a proposal that offers a grounding for art/design teachers to comprehend and be able to articualte *why*, *how*, and *towards what ends* they are teaching; and that does so by tackling the current mis-alignment of models head-on, from the actual core of the institution, and with long-term foresight instead of the more familiar sense of temporarily shoring up the problem …?

A proper response requires answering the following questions honestly and explicitly, with concrete justifications and examples:

Is it necessary and desirable to cultivate an increasingly generalized, inherently cross-disciplinary art/design education? Why?

Is it necessary and desirable to more broadly encompass of other social studies in art/design education? Why?

Should a curriculum be *predominantly* geared towards
1. questioning, 2. fulfilling, or 3. creating
a. social needs, or b. commercial demands?
Why?

> We no longer have any desire for design that is driven
> by need. Something less prestigious than a "designed"
> object can do the same thing for less money. The
> Porsche Cayenne brings you home, but any car will do
> the same thing, certainly less expensively and probably
> just as quickly. But who remembers the first book, the
> first table, the first house, the first airplane? All these
> inventions went through a prototype phase, to a more or
> less fully developed model, which subsequently became
> design. Invention and the design represent different
> stages of a technological development, but unfortunately,
> these concepts are being confused with one another.
> If the design is in fact the aesthetic refinement of an
> invention, then there is room for debate about what the
> "design problem" is. Many designers still use the term
> "problem-solving" as a non-defined description of their
> task. But what is in fact the problem? Is it scientific?
> Is it social? Is it aesthetic? Is the problem the list of
> prerequisites? Or is the problem the fact that there is no
> problem? (Van der Velden, 2006)

Perhaps contemporary art/design teaching indeed implies
less "problem solving" and more a kind of social philosophy, as
suggested here—with admittedly simplistic polarity—by Emilio
Ambasz:

The first attitude involves a commitment to

> design as a problem-solving activity, capable of
> formulating, in physical terms, solutions to problems
> encountered in the natural and socio-cultural milieu.
> The opposite attitude, which we may call one of
> counter-design, chooses instead to emphasize the need
> for a renewal of philosophical discourse and for social
> and political involvement as a way of bringing around
> structural changes in our society. (Ambasz, 1972, quoted
> in Van der Velden, 2006)

—which is more or less confirmed here:

> Education is all about trust. The teacher embraces the
> uncertain future by trusting the student, supporting
> the growth of something that cannot yet be seen,
> an emergent sensibility that cannot be judged by
> contemporary standards. A good school fosters a way
> of thinking that draws on everything that is known in
> order to jump energetically into the unknown, trusting
> the formulations of the next generation that by definition
> defy the logic of the present. Education is therefore a
> form of optimism that gives our field a future by trusting
> the students to see, think and do things we cannot.

> This optimism is crucial. The students arrive from
> around 55 different countries with an endless thirst for
> experimentation. It is not enough for us to give each of
> them expertise in the current state-of-the-art. We have
> to give them the capacity to change the discipline itself,
> to completely define the state-of-the-art. More than
> simply training the architects how to design we redesign
> the very figure of the architect. The goal is not a certain
> kind of architecture but a certain kind of evolution in
> architectural intelligence.

> The architect is, first and foremost, a public intellectual,
> crafting the material world to communicate ideas.
> Architecture is a way of thinking. By thinking
> differently, the architect allows others to see the world
> differently, and perhaps to live differently. This perhaps
> is crucial. For all the relentless determination of our
> loudest architects and their most spectacular projects,
> architecture dictates nothing in the end. The real gift of
> the best architects is to produce a kind of hesitation in
> the routines of contemporary life, an opening in which
> new potentials are offered, new patterns, rhythms,
> moods, pleasures, connections, perceptions ... offered as
> a gift that may or may not be taken up. (Wigley, 2006)

Following the line of many discussions I've had with colleagues,
I'd suggest that one practical way of proceeding is to directly
reconsider the relevance of that Bauhaus-derived skill-based
workshop/studio teaching, if only because it has become such
a platitude. An obvious starting point would be to contest the
key conviction of the modernist pedagogical canon, i.e. that
teaching programs should be (to quote De Duve again) "based
on the reduction of practice to the fundamental elements of a
syntax immanent to the medium." The lingering notion here is
that the systematic exploration of elemental principles (shape,
colour, texture, contrast, pattern, etc.) via practical exercises
can be usefully applied to any medium.

Starting from scratch, would our virgin curriculum, founded
on the CONTEMPORARY paradigm circumscribed above by
such as Findeli, De Duve and Eno, logically manifest itself in
the same way? If the boundaries between disciplines no longer
hold, and with *attitude*, *practice* and *deconstruction* as the
bedrock of our milieu, we surely need to rethink the nature of
the primary tools and skills offered to new students. As trite as
it might sound, "thinking" is both a tool *and* a skill—a big-C
Cultural version of common sense as opposed to received
wisdom:

> If the question of art is no longer one of producing or
> reproducing a certain kind of object (and if the medium
> no longer sets the terms of making—what "painting"
> demands, or sets out as a problem) then a responsible,
> medium-based training, which always says *how to make*,
> can't get to the question of *what to make*. How does
> one get from assign-ments that can be fulfilled—colour
> charts, a litho stone that doesn't fill in after x-number
> of prints, a weld that holds—to something that one
> can claim as an artist, to something that hasn't been
> assigned?

> So there is a kind of gap or aporia that comes either in
> the middle of undergraduate art school or in between
> BFA and MFA, and that aporia marks a shift from the
> technical and teaching on the side of the teacher, to the
> psychological and teaching on the side of the student—
> working on the student rather than teaching him or her
> something. "He is saying this to me but what does he
> want?" as Lacan imagines the scene; or in the figure of
> the gift, "Is this what you want?" "Will you acknowledge
> this?" (Singerman, email 2006)

From this vantage, the idea of focusing on a more transferable
"design thinking" implies not only easy communication
and movement between disciplines (both physically and
bureaucratically), but also integration with the broader social
sciences (philosophy, sociology, cultural studies) in view of
what Potter described earlier as knowing "the present as a
commitment in depth."

Further, it seems imperative to introduce such "design thinking"
at the very beginning of an undergraduate program, precisely
to allow a more sophisticated understanding of culture and
Culture to inform and infect subsequent practical work. Such
a model could be implemented in different ways, at different
extremes. One would be to offer a course in "design thinking"
prior to any other media-specific and/or practical teaching;
another would be to run it *alongside* other teaching, as a
regular counterpoint to orthodox practical classes; a third
would be to make it the focus of an entire department, with
specialisms, workshops and other practical teaching available
as supplementary offshoots.

Such a class, course, or even department might effectively begin
with an open discussion about the very nature of working as
a contemporary artist/designer—which immediately implies
interrogating this very duality. Again, all this leans towards the
development of prioritizing a general *thinking* about the field
and its surround, rather than *making* in a specific medium. We
could consider it the nurturing of a *critical faculty* as a formative
skill.

> Artists are the subject of graduate school; they are both
> who and what is taught. In grammar school, to continue

this play of subjects and objects, teachers teach art; in my undergraduate college, artists taught art. In the graduate school artists teach artists. Artists are both the subject of the graduate art department and its goal. The art historian Howard Risatti, who has written often on the difficulties of training contemporary artists, argued not long ago that "at the very heart of the problem of educating the artist lies the difficulty of defining what it means to be an artist today." The "problem" is not a practical one; the meaning of an artist cannot be solved by faculty or administration, although across this book a number of professors and administrators try. Rather, the problem of definition is at the heart of the artist's education because it is the formative and defining problem of recent art. Artists are made by troubling it over, by taking it seriously. (Singerman, 2001)

Finally, for now: what's the potential payoff of an art/design pedagogy founded on this "critical faculty"?

A provisional answer: to educate students primarily towards becoming informed thinkers, sensitive to both culture at large ("the world") *as well as* their specific Culture interests ("the art world," "the design world"), and how they overlap and effect each other …

… by introducing a vocabulary geared towards describing both forms of c/Culture (for example, defining and debating the intricacies of the terms in De Duve's table, from "talent" to "deconstruction") …

… in order to develop the foundational skill of coherent articulation—the ability to explain, justify, defend, criticize, and argue …

… towards a level of critical sophistication in which "critical" refers to engaged discussion as part of a historical and theoretical continuum rather than the usual rudimentary value judgments of the group or individual crit …

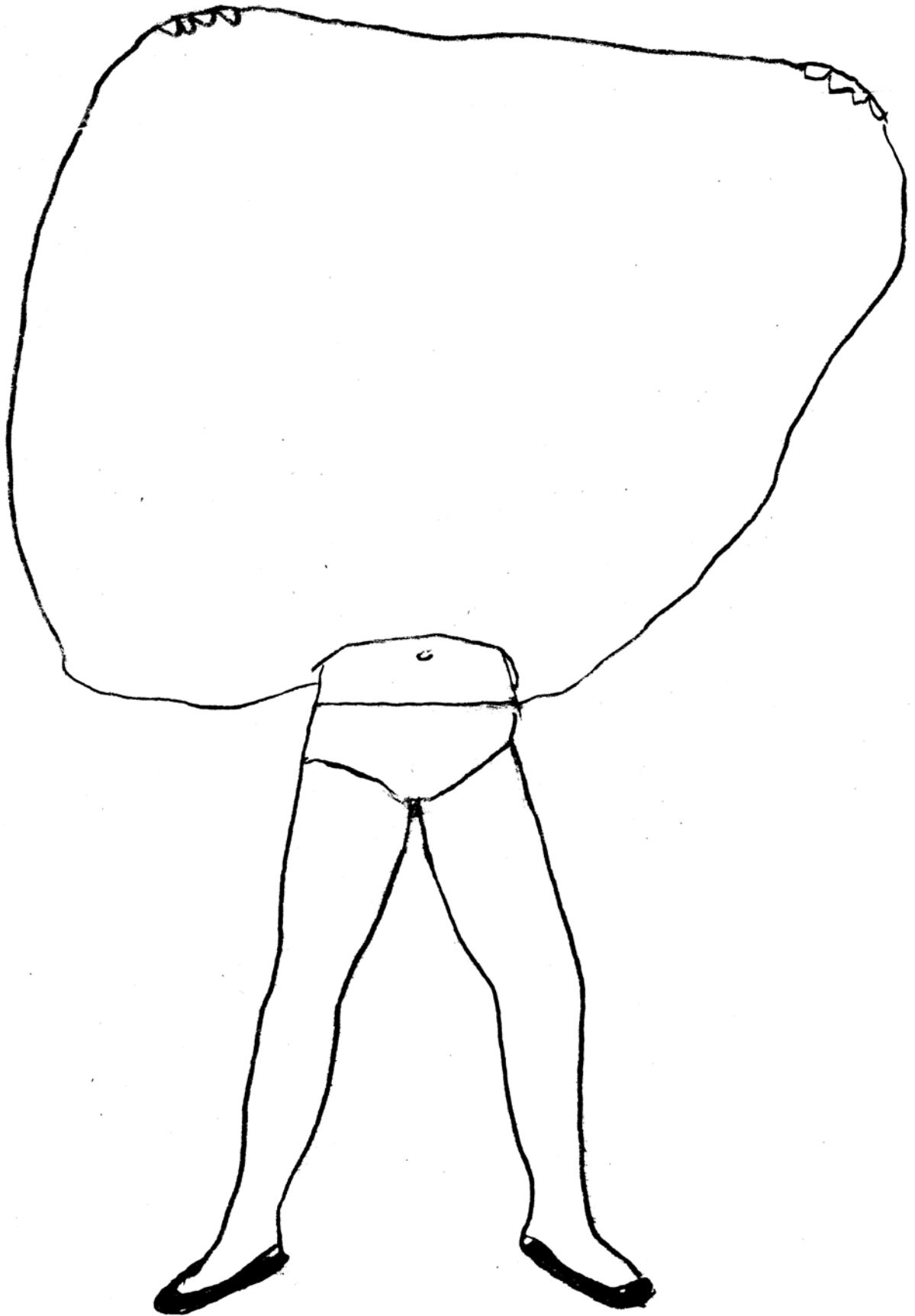In short, to foster a climate of progressive reflexivity.

Educating reflexivity—teaching students to observe their practice from both inside and outside—fosters the ability to anticipate potential roles and their effects, so that upon entering the field, industry, market, academia, or whatever other facet of the after-school environment, they should at least be equipped to ask whether they

want to / ought to / refuse to
enter into / challenge / reject the
existing art & design field / industry / market / academia

Alain Findeli proposes a similar model (expressed in terms of teaching an "intelligence of the invisible" through "basic design") in order to redirect design education from its current path towards "a branch of product development, marketing communication, and technological fetishism." "If it is not to remain a *reactive* attitude," he says, "it will have to become *proactive* …"

> If we accept the fact that the canonical, linear, causal, and instrumental model is no longer adequate to describe the complexity of the design process, we are invited to adopt a new model whose theoretical framework is inspired by systems science, complexity theory, and practical philosophy. In the new model, instead of science and technology, I would prefer perception and action, the first term referring to the concept of visual intelligence, and the second indicating that a technological act always is a moral act. As for the reflective relationship between perception and action, I consider it governed not by deductive logics, but by a logic based on aesthetics.
>
> I believe that visual intelligence, ethical sensibility and aesthetic intuition can be developed and strengthened through some kind of basic design education. However,

instead of having this basic design taught in the first year as a preliminary course, as in the Bauhaus tradition, it would be taught in parallel with studio work through the entire course of study, from the first to last year. Moholy-Nagy used to say that design was not a profession, but an attitude.

> Didn't he claim that this course was perfectly fitted for any professional curriculum, i.e., not only for designers, but also for lawyers, doctors, teachers, etc.? (Findeli, 2001)

This is not too far away from the recent "MFA is the new MBA" soundbite, which asserts another paradigm shift—namely, the business world's recognition of the value of unorthodox thinking over traditionally conservative managerial procedures.

*

If all this were accepted, the immediate concern would likely be how to monitor and accredit such a curriculum—not to mention how to articulate and justify it to apprehensive parents, and their children who are seemingly becoming more parent-like than their parents in their hunger for the pacifying fiction of predictable pathways to employment. But this is jumping too far ahead: I want to end, or begin, by emphasizing that *what should be done?* ought to take clear precedence over concerns over *how should we do it?*

This is nothing more than sturdy "design thinking" itself, of course—but that doesn't diminish its urgency. If such a reflexive review doesn't happen soon, the usual brand of opinion-polled, market-driven decision-making will surely end up destroying the industry it floods with its supposedly satisfied customers—if nothing else, by making it unbearably bland. I suspect that maintaining this simple what-then-how sequence may well be the most difficult part.

(Only an Attitude of Orientation)

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Another pamphlet concerned with art/design education
compiled by Stuart Bailey
as a sequel to "Towards a Critical Faculty"
Edited and published by Office for Contemporary Art Norway,
Oslo, winter 2009–10

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Like its predecessor, this pamphlet aims to provoke a discussion
around how a contemporary art/design school might reasonably
reconfigure itself in light of recent and projected changes in
how institutions and disciplines actually operate in the early
21st century.

> Here's an oppurtunity to freely imagine what should be
> done, unhindered by administrative worries about what
> can't possibly be done. (Stark, 2007)

The premise of "Towards a Critical Faculty" was to attempt to
grasp what my colleagues meant by "design thinking." Though
I initially considered this term a tautology, they considered it
a major aim of contemporary art/design education. And so I
ended up trying to perform what I presumed it meant—a kind
of loose, cross-disciplinary problem solving—by collecting past
and present fragments of insight that I thought ought to inform
a future mandate. Where the majority of those excerpts were
directly concerned with pedagogy, from seminal Arts & Crafts
and Bauhaus statements onwards, this follow-up looks further
afield, seeking tangential reinforcement and extension of the
same line of thinking. Its sources are drawn from the poppier
end of sociology, philosophy, and literature. In fact, most of its
sources touch on all three.

If the first pamphlet tried to summarize the lay of the land,
this one tries to summon the outcome its inhabitants might
be teaching *towards*. Readers are referred to the disclaimers
listed the first time around, and are particularly asked to
bear with my sidestepping such basic distinctions as art/
design and under/postgraduate. Although I think this reflects
the general confusion, the idea isn't to perpetuate it—only
to focus the energies of this reader elsewhere for the time
being. I should, however, add one new point: this approach
isn't *against* teaching basic skills and techniques (whether
analogue or digital), history or theory, only *for* an explicit
consensus regarding the whole those components are supposed
to constitute. Before beginning, I'd like to reiterate that these
pamphlets make no claim to authority, only to engage and
entertain both staff and students—ideally at the same time.

————————

1. Pragmatism

Although I consider this pamphlet a reader like the last one,
this time I'm going to paraphrase its sources instead of directly
quoting them, hoping to absorb their lessons deeply enough
to pass them on with conviction. Actually, I'm going to start
two layers out, by paraphrasing my colleague David Reinfurt
paraphrasing William James, the American philosopher who
began his famous series of lectures on Pragmatism with the
following anecdote.

On a camping trip, James returns from a walk to find his fellow
campers engaged in a hypothetical dispute about a man, a
tree, and a squirrel. The squirrel is clinging to one side of the
tree and the man is directly opposite on the other side of it.
Every time the man moves around the tree to glimpse the
squirrel, it moves equally as fast in the opposite direction. While
it's evident that the man goes round the tree, the argument
revolves around the question: *does he go round the squirrel?*
The group is divided on the issue, and James is called upon to
make the casting vote.

The philosopher recalls the adage "whenever you meet a
contradiction you must make a distinction," and proclaims that
the correct answer depends on what the group agrees "going
round" actually means. There are two possibilities: if taken to
mean *passing to the north then east then south then west*, then
the man *does* go round the squirrel; if taken to mean being
in front then to the left then behind then to the right, then he
does not. Make the distinction, says James, and there is no
ambiguity—both parties are right or wrong depending on how
the verb "to go round" is practically conceived. The key here is
the word "practically," as James's point is precisely founded on
hard facts rather than soft abstractions.

James recounts the anecdote because it provides a "peculiarly
simple" example of *the pragmatic method*. I was first introduced
to the idea by David, who opened his own lecture with the
same story. Titled "Naïve Set Theory," this talk comprised three
parts, each a compressed story of a man's lasting contribution
to his discipline, as chronicled in a particular book. To cut
this short story even shorter, these were: William James's
conception of Pragmatic (as opposed to Rationalist) philosophy,
Kurt Gödel's Naïve (as opposed to Axiomatic) approach to
mathematics, and Paul R. Halmos's Naïve (as opposed to
Axiomatic) approach to logic. By the end of the talk it's clear
that, despite hopping across disciplines and skirting around
some quite complex ideas (at least for newcomers), each
example is an articulation of the same basic idea: that the
ongoing process of *attempting to understand*—though never
really understanding completely—*is absolutely productive*. The
relentless attempt to understand is what keeps any practice
moving forward.

James's (and David's) attitude is marked by both a rejection
of absolute *truths*, and faith in verifiable *facts*. This is staunch
empiricist thinking, founded on the notion that "beliefs" are—
practically speaking—"rules for action," and that we need only
perceive their potential function and/or outcome in order to
determine their significance. James sums up the pragmatic
method as *only an attitude of orientation*, of looking away from
first things (preconceptions, principles, categories) and towards
last things (results, fruits, and consequences).

There are two introductory points to draw from this. First, that
an *attitude* like empiricism might be usefully identified and
its implications drawn out and considered across disciplines.
Second, that it's useful to start with the result in mind and
work backwards, in order to design a method oriented towards
achieving that outcome. And so in accordance with both: the
hoped-for results of our as-yet phantom course are precisely the
attitudes demonstrated by the following examples.

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2. Discomfort

In 2001 the British cultural critic Michael Bracewell published
The Nineties, an account of the decade's art, society, and, in
particular, pop culture. In an introductory conversation between
two "culture-vulturing city slickers" that frames the rest of
the book, one remarks to the other that culture is "wound
on an ever-tightening coil." He's referring to the momentum
of art assimilating and reproducing itself according to the
logic of the phrase "Pop will eat itself" (itself the name of a
very nineties' band). This account of unprecedented cultural
self-consciousness is backed up by a list of dominant trends,
that include the subtle shift from yuppie bullishness to its
rehabilitation as "attitude"; irony supplanted by "authenticity"
as the temper of the zeitgeist, most patently manifest in Reality
and Conflict TV; and the encroaching sense of culture having
been distinctly *designed* by media, retail or advertising—a
state of high mediation, of "culture" wrapped in quotation
marks. In other words, Bracewell argues, millenial culture is
characterized by how it wants to project itself, how it *wants
to appear to be* rather than *just being what it is*, and this gap
between appearance and actuality is getting bigger.

Largely assembled from a collection of concise, diverse profiles originally written for a variety of style and Sunday supplement magazines during the decade itself, *The Nineties* operates at an odd speed. The book combines the immediacy and involvement of real-time journalism with the delay and detachment of reflective commentary. Its affairs remain too recent, and their effects too tangible, to be considered at a comfortable remove, as "history." Considered in relation to a school with an obvious stake in contemporary culture, what we might call the book's *keen disinterest in immediate history* offers a working model, an editorial premise that aims to register the condition *in situ*—or as close as seems feasible.

One of Bracewell's more vivid conceits is to isolate "frothy coffee" as the decade's all-purpose signifier, one of a few infantile treats he suggests amount to the "Trojan Horse of cultural materialism." On reading this, a friend noted the not unlikely scenario of reading about what Bracewell calls the "Death by Cappucino effect" *while drinking a cappucino*, and it occurred to me that in an art/design school, such discomfiting self-awareness might be harnessed towards realizing a sense of "criticism" more pertinent than the usual discussion of work within whatever disciplinary vacuum. A "criticism," rather, that refers to the ability and inclination to confront, engage with, and communally discuss a subject *as it happens*—whether a piece of work, a cultural condition, or the relation between the two. The end of Bracewell's summary seems to call for as much, diagnosing the cumulative outcome of the nineties as "post-political," a state of impotence characterized by a "fear of subjectivity." Slavoj Žižek similarly evokes a state where reflection and reflexivity have been undermined to such an extent that "it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of Capitalism." The aim of this exercise would be to nurture this critical attitude in view of reinstating a more athletic sense of agency.

In his essay "Cybernetics and Ghosts," Italo Calvino describes the constructive generosity of literature that deliberately sets out to disorient its reader. He argues that by means of recursion, involution, and other heady techniques of metafiction, the labyrinthine constructions of such as Alain Robbe-Grillet and Jorge Luis Borges lead away from any comfortable sense of narrative continuum, and that the effort of maintaining a mental grasp on the writing, of constantly reorienting oneself to cope, constitutes its own very particular aesthetic experience. Such experience has obvious pedagogical implications, and Calvino himself referred to such techniques as a kind of "training for survival."

———————

3. Definition

Calvino is essentially describing (and promoting) the process of making a form strange in order to resist both one's own preconceptions and the weight of others' opinions. ("Make it new," as Ezra Pound famously translated Copernicus.) A usefully exaggerated example of this is Semantic Translation, a poetic technique conceived by the Polish writer, film-maker and publisher Stefan Themerson, that manages to be at once ferociously ironic and straight-up hilarous. According to its inventor, Semantic Poetry Translation (SPT) is "a machine made using certain parts of my brain," as demonstrated most prominently his novella *Bayamus*. Fundamentally, SPT takes a grey area of meaning and attempts to pinpoint and clarify it. He introduces the process in order to reclaim poetry from the mouths of "political demagogues" who in the twentieth century began to adopt the tools of poets—repetition, alliteration, etc.—towards their own dubious ends. The idea is to restore emptied-out words, clichés and platitudes with their fullest, specific meanings by supplanting them with their precise, verbose dictionary definitions. The method is usually demonstrated by comparing existing poems or songs with a semantically translated version.

For example, from this:

> The wine among the flowers,
>   O lonely me!

—to this:

> The fermented
>   grape-
>   juice
>   among the reproductive
>   parts
>   of
>   seed-plants

> O! I'm conscious
>   of
>   my state
>   of
>   being isolated
>   from
>   others!

But Semantic Translation is more double-edged than this brief description suggests. Although it is *ostensibly* an attempt to reclaim the "truth" behind words, the proposition is essentially ironic, not proselytizing. It's more accurate to say that at best "truths" are more properly "beliefs," and that beliefs should be treated with the utmost suspicion. One of the great benefits of the technique is that it reminds us how "the world is more complicated than the language we use to talk about it." The nature of reading through the pedantic extent of a piece of Semantic Translation is to experience language made strange, to perceive both its technical depth along with its limitations. Themerson referred to the process as "scratching the form to reveal the content."

In an astute summary of Themerson's intentions, Mike Sperlinger recently noted that his promotion of "clarification of meaning" is essentially parodic. The clarification that's *actually* happening, says Sperlinger, is that it's *impossible to "truly" clarify meaning* because "meaning is always going to escape and proliferate." I had this in mind when recently asked to write a definition of Graphic Design for a new *Design Dictionary*. I used the oppurtunity to attempt a discipline-specific overview in the same candid spirit as Bracewell's culture-wide *Nineties*, i.e. to summarize the general landscape as plainly and accurately as possible, as opposed to the version a school administration would advertise (whether to sell to parents or students). Here's an excerpt:

> Rather than the way things work, Graphic Design is still largely (popularly) perceived as referring to the way things look: surface, style, and increasingly, spin. It is written about and documented largely in terms of its representation of the zeitgeist. In recent decades, Graphic Design has become associated foremost with commerce, becoming virtually synonymous with corporate identity and advertising, while its role in more intellectual pursuits is increasingly marginalized. Furthermore, through a complex of factors character-istic of late Capitalism, many of the more strategic aspects of Graphic Design are undertaken by those working in "middle-management" positions, typically Public Relations or Marketing departments. Under these conditions, those working under the title Graphic Designer fulfill only the production (typesetting, page makeup, programming) at the tail-end of this system.

> On the other hand, in line with the ubiquitous fragmentation of post-industrial society into ever-smaller coteries, there exists an international scene of Graphic Designers who typically make work independent of the traditional external commission, in self-directed or collaborative projects with colleagues in neighboring disciplines. Such work is typically marked by its experimental and personal nature, generally well-documented and circulated in a wide range of media.

As these two aspects of Graphic Design—the overtly commercial and the overtly marginal—grow increasingly distinct, this schizophrenia renders the term increasingly vague and useless. At best, this implies that the term ought always to be distinctly qualified by the context of its use.

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4. Other schools

Clearly this definition of "Graphic Design" isn't particularly definitive. The meaning leaks so much that I have a hard time imagining the term it elaborates being usefully applied at all. However, in considering how the recognition and articulation of this confusion might inform an educational program, two possibilities suggest themselves. The first is essentially reactionary: to design distinct courses for the overtly commercial and overtly marginal ("intellectual"?) trajectories, dispensing with the illusion that they can be combined. The second is fundamentally progressive: to operate outside these existing categories, the point being to propose different ways of thinking altogether.

In his book *The Shape of Time*, the art historian George Kubler proposed a model which broke apart and reconstituted the prevailing compartmentalization of the arts. In his new system, architecture and packaging—both essentially containers—were conflated under the rubric "Envelopes," all small solids and containers under "Sculpture," and all work on a flat plane under "Painting." These re-classifications already fell within Kubler's broader call to supplant the regular distinction of Useless (=art) and Useful (=design) with Desirable (=objects that last) and Non-desirable (=objects that don't last). His new system emphasized artefacts that stood the test of time, regardless of whether they fulfilled a more quantifiable purpose (a hammer) or a less quantifiable one (a painting). Alternatively, in *What is a designer*, the self-described cabinet-maker Norman Potter distinguished between "Things," "Places," and "Messages." So far as I know, neither system was pursued beyond these two books, but they remain useful places to begin the productive destabilization of prevailing classification.

One contemporary model that appears to operate on this principle is Cittadellarte, an institution in Biella, Italy, which was set up by the artist Michelangelo Pistoletto in 1998. The name is a contraction of the Italian words for "city" and "citadel"—a semantic paradox and an example of what Michel Foucault called a "heterotopia." A heterotopia is a space that is in some sense open and closed at the same time (his prime example is a cruise ship). Comprised of apparently contradictory qualities, a heterotopia is by definition outside the norm. Cittadellarte's aim is explicitly earnest: to directly question and effect the contemporary role of art in society by operating as a "mediator" between the arts and other fields such as politics, science, education, and economics. It is organized into *uffizi*—offices with irregular titles like Nourishment, Spirituality, and Work next to Architecture and Fashion. Participants pass through for varying amounts of time to participate in projects involving local, national, and international businessmen, politicians, economists, and so on. The whole enterprise is thus couched in a global ambition that flavours its pithy slogans: "Art at the centre of a socially responsible transformation," "Italian enterprise is a cultural mission," "The artist as the sponsor of thought."

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5. Group exercise

After reading my dictionary definition of Graphic Design, a friend told me it was far too subjective and that I might productively subject it to an "objective" Semantic Translation. I outsourced the task to a group of design students in California, partly in order to find out how accurate they thought my original description was, and partly because I thought it would be useful for them to make their own free translations. I split the long definition into bite-size sentences and randomly assigned them to the class. Here's one small excerpt from my original text:

> Furthermore, through a complex of factors characteristic of late capitalism, many of the more strategic aspects of Graphic Design are undertaken by those working in "middle-management" positions, typically Public Relations or Marketing departments.

—and here's its Semantic Translation by one of the students:

> In addition, through a group of related circumstances contributing to the descriptions of recent profit-based trade, many of the more carefully planned features of the art or profession of visual communication that combines images, words, or ideas, are undertaken by those earning income at the level just below that of senior administrators, typically those helping to maintain a favorable public image or those in the territorial divisions of an aggregate of functions involved in moving goods from producer to consumer.

I can't say the exercise changed my mind about the definition, but it seemed productive for the class. Because so many of the sentences dispersed among the students contained the same terms (not least "Graphic Design" itself), when we came to recombine them back into a single collectively-translated monster composite, the individual "definitions" of the same word were so diverse that we were forced to decide on one (which actually meant making a single amalgamation of a few) in order to make the new whole clear and consistent. In other words, we were forced to transform a batch of relatively specific meanings into more diffuse, diluted, ambiguous, and abstract ones when combined for wider use—a practical lesson in the symbiotic implications of definition and democracy.

Another friend argued that my definition pulled its punches by not pointing out that the overtly commercial and overtly marginal poles of Graphic Design are equally *impotent*. The former because the kind of work commissioned by large corporations and other mainly commercial enterprises has become utterly bland and innocuous, stuck in a loop of catering to market-researched demands that are themselves based on desires based on the previous round of market-researched demands, and so on. The latter (marginal) because its intellectual collateral—personal interest and investment—is predominantly hobbyist, and so devoid of any social or political motivation or efficacy. In his view, the role of designers has rotated 180 degrees from solving problems to creating desires, and regardless of whether these desires are pointed towards commercial or intellectual ends, they are always surplus, i.e. unnecessary, lacking urgency. He proposes that the contemporary designer ought instead to design him- or herself into a third role, essentially a "research" position that focuses on forging purely speculative projects without any obligation to produce actual products.

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6. Well-adjusted

In 2005 the American novelist David Foster Wallace delivered a commencement speech at Kenyon College, Ohio. A staple of U.S. graduation, these speeches typically involve a public figure or alumnus offering ceremonial wisdom and advice to the graduating class. Characteristically, Wallace simultaneously embraces and parodies the format, cross-examining the clichés in search of genuine affirmation and benefit. In other words, he scratches the form to reveal some content.

The speech begins with a requisite moral epigram—the difference being that Wallace acknowledges he's beginning with a requisite moral epigram. He continues in this self-reflexive vein, unfolding what's effectively a *meta*-commencement speech—and it becomes increasingly clear that Wallace is

working something out for himself as much as his audience. As such, he speaks with intimate conviction.

So two young fish are swimming past an old fish, who says, "Morning boys! How's the water?" When the old fish has passed, one of the young ones asks the other, "What the hell is water?"

The anecdote sets up Wallace's key themes: the awareness of self and surroundings; the task (and difficulty and pain) of maintaining such awareness on a daily basis in the post-collegiate Real World; and the consequent realization that YOU are not the center of the universe but one of a community with equivalent needs and desires and frustrations—an idea that's as patently obvious as it is difficult to act as if aware of it.

With this in mind, Wallace calls into question the actual value—and so the fundamental purpose—of the kind of liberal arts education the Kenyon students are about to complete. He deconstructs another cliché in response, positing that the apparently trite, even patronizing idea that a liberal arts course *teaches you how to think* is actually eminently practical and productive if considered in the sense of *the ability to choose what to think about and how to go about doing so.*

He illustrates the point by recounting a regular adult evening, exhausted from work, driving to buy groceries, and having to deal with a number of banal frustrations along the way: traffic, muzak, disorganization, screaming kids, rudeness. Our "default setting," he says, is to view these obstacles as set up against YOU in particular, to get frustrated and angry, and to direct that frustration and anger at others whose existence appears (from the point of view of this state of mind) to be solely geared towards preventing YOU from doing what YOU need to do. The privilege that "learning how to think" affords, he says, is the possibility of realizing those around you in the supermarket/world are in all likelihood experiencing their own markedly similar frustrations. And so you might coax yourself into thinking and acting with benevolence rather than rage.

Wallace is careful to point out how "extraordinarily difficult" such humility and self-discipline is; and that, despite his supposedly exalted position as commencement speaker, he's no model in this regard. His story is a peculiarly simple example of the virtue of self-awareness—as a mechanism for coping with the adult fact of being "uniquely, completely, imperially alone." This state of quotidian grace, he says, is what we mean when we refer to someone as being "well-adjusted."

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7. Solitude

In the "P for Professor" section of *Abécédaire*, a testimonial interview made for French TV, Gilles Deleuze discusses his work as a teacher. In the first of three moments of unscripted insight, he describes the enormous amount of preparation required to "get something into one's head" just enough—to a teetering degree of comprehension—to be able to convey it to a class with the sort of inspiration that only comes with *live realization*. This preparatory work is like a rehearsal for a performance, he says—a planned improvisation. If the speaker doesn't find what he's saying of interest himself, no one else will. The ideal is to learn something while conveying it, he adds, though this shouldn't be mistaken for vanity; it's not a case of finding oneself passionate and interesting, only the subject matter.

Later, Deleuze draws a distinction between schools and movements. A school, he says, is a typically negative force characterized by authority, hierarchy and bureaucracy, and so is heavy, fixed and exclusive. While a movement is less easily defined, he continues, it generally alludes more to intentions, attitudes and the passage of ideas, and is therefore comparatively light, flexible and open. Surrealism was a model school and André Breton acted as its headmaster—imposing rules, sacking staff and settling scores. Dada, on the other hand

was an exemplary movement—a flow of ideas that continues to touch many people, places and forms still happily devoid of any sense of overriding order.

Deleuze's final insight in "P for Professor" recalls Wallace's musing on solitude. In Deleuze's experience, the immature student is drawn to enroll in a school primarily as a consequence of "being alone." Lacking the sophistication to think otherwise, school is understood above all as an opportunity to participate in a community. Deleuze, however, considers it his job to foster the opposite—to *reconcile the student with his or her solitude* by teaching them the nature of its benefits. To this end, Deleuze emphatically *circulated* philosophical concepts in his lectures and seminars—not in view of eventually establishing them (which would be to turn them into a "school of thought") but in the hope that they might be applied and manipulated by others according to their own sovereign interests and talents, and so remain perpetually in movement.

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8. Trial & error

Established in Arnhem in 1998, the postgraduate design school Werkplaats Typografie (Typography Workshop) is an example of an institution founded on apparently ideal conditions: officially affiliated to the local art school and so sufficiently funded, yet physically and spiritually autonomous. In theory at least, it seems ideally placed to cultivate Deleuze's "movement" and avoid the drag of his "school." As one of its initial clutch of students, and having maintained irregular contact with its teachers and subsequent participants since, I've been able to follow its progress both first- and second-hand. In fact, I've been invited to write about it for one context or another in handy five-year intervals; each occasion has been an excuse to note my changing ideas about the place, about what's actually happened from conception to current incarnation.

The first, "Incubation of a Workshop" was written in 1998 from the vantage of an idealistic student in the first of his two years in an institution under construction. It's a kind of prose home movie that documents the essential openness of the place in progress, emphasizing its quirky, homegrown nature, lack of hierarchy and purported "two-way teaching" between not-quite-teachers and not-quite-students. The Werkplaats' founding idea was to set up an art/design school based on real (=commissioned) work rather than fictional or self-directed projects, because only this connection with the outside provides the "correct sense of requiredness" necessary to make substantial, meaningful work.

In 2003, "Some False Starts" was written as the introduction to a book that accompanied what its by now mildly jaded author thought was a too-soon "retrospective" of work at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. It begins by denouncing the "relentless sugary pitch," "wide-eyed positivity"and "woolly moralism" of the previous essay, then tries to recount what had *actually* happened since, despite those good intentions. Tentatively tucked away in the middle is a coy criticism of the WT's increasing obsession with its own image and "supression of mistakes." (The writer thinks any real art or design school ought, on the contrary, to make the most of its mistakes.) A few arguments and excursions are recounted, with each negative offset by a positive. "It was all human enough in the end," he shrugs, and it's clear that early idealism has shifted to late accommodation.

Finally, in 2008, an "Errata" for the school's tenth anniversary book essentially amounts to a reconsideration of such self-aggrandizing which, it seemed to me, had now become a large part of the whole point of the place. Otherwise put, relentless self-reflection seemed to have become its defining characteristic: it was now a school about school, more concerned its own working principles than outside work. This is manifest not only by their publishing yet another autobiography

in the first place, but also by the work shown in it—which "runs a small gamut from the very local to the very personal." I used to think this was disappointingly narcissistic or solipsistic, but now I consider it more affirmatively symptomatic of a discipline (or a few blurred disciplines) between states, a little lost, trying to work out what it has been, is, and might become. In lieu of any seemingly *worthwhile* work from the wider world, the overwhelmingly local nature of all the self-initiated books, posters for visiting lecturers and flyers for film screenings that pack the book's pages suggest that the WT's principal aim has simply (and complexly) become "community-building"—in search of Deleuze's reconciliation with solitude. This, then, is an instance of a school currently experiencing a reflexive reconsideration of its founding discipline. I'm not sure how much the school realizes this itself, or needs to, really, but the process could certainly be admitted and utilized elsewhere.

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9. The demonstrator

I'll close with some incidents from the classroom scenes in Robert M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, as they usefully summarize the component attitudes related so far in this document:

> pragmatic ways of dealing with objective facts
>
> the discomfiting observation and articulation of the current condition while participating in it
>
> the deliberate disruption of received wisdom by making it productively strange
>
> the collective redefinition of the situation
>
> to establish a new set of terms
>
> towards a well-adjusted awareness of self and surroundings
>
> the communal participation towards an individual reconciliation with solitude
>
> through deliberate trial and error that constitutes a "lesson"

In one particular passage, Robert M. Pirsig's alter-ego-protagonist-teacher Phaedrus assigns his undergraduate class in rhetoric an expansive but straightforward task: to write an essay on some aspect of the United States. He becomes preoccupied with one particular girl who, despite a reputation for being serious and hardworking, finds herself in a state of perpetual crisis, unable to think of "anything to say." He obliquely recognizes in her block something of his own paralysis in not being able to think of "anything to say" back to by way of help beyond suggesting a subject—the local Opera House. This doesn't help her either, but after next proposing out of sheer frustration that she should focus on *a single brick*, something gives and the student produces a long, substantial essay about the front of the building. Initially baffled by his own involuntary insight, Phaedrus reasons that she was blocked by the expectation that she ought to be repeating something already stated elsewhere, and freed by the comic extremity of his suggestion. There was no obvious precedent to an essay about this particular brick, therefore no right or wrong way to go about it, and so no phantom standard to measure up to. By this curious, circuitous, yet perfectly logical method, the student is liberated to see for herself and act independently. In this way, Pirsig/Phaedrus instructively enacts his bald reconsideration of the question "how to teach?" in front of the students he's trying to teach.

He continues to perform variations on this exercise with the rest of his class ("write about the back of your thumb for an hour"), which yield similar results, and concludes that this tacit expectation of imitation is the real barrier to uninhibited engagement, active participation and plausible progress.

A few further scenes of fraught but instructive trial and error conclude with his fundamental consideration of the nature of "quality," the cornerstone implied by the book's subtitle, "an inquiry into values." Through a series of simple exercises he first proves to the class that they all recognize quality, because they routinely make basic quality judgements themselves whether they realize it or not. Then he assigns the essay question "What is quality?," and counters their angry response that *he* should be telling *them*, not the other way round, by admitting that actually he has no idea himself and genuinely hoped someone might come up with a good answer. A few days later, though, he does draft his own self-annulling definition: because quality is essentially felt, i.e. a non-thinking process, and because—conversely—definitions are the product of formal thinking, *by definition quality can not be defined*. This leads him to respond to his students' perpetual question, "How do I make something of quality?" (like a decent piece of writing) with "It doesn't matter *how* it's quality as long as it *is* quality!"; and to "But how will I know it is?" with "Because you'll just *know*—you just proved to me you make judgements all the time." The student is thus lured into forming his or her own opinions based on their own *inherent* sense of quality. "It was just exactly this and nothing else," he concludes, "that taught him to write."

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To duplicate the end of the first pamphlet: consider a reconstituted art/design foundation course based on the qualities described in this one—a curriculum that embraces as much sociology, philosophy and literature as art and design, as demonstrated here. Supplanting those outdated approaches to art/design education, this new foundation might involve its students self-reflexively designing their own program as an intrinsic part of its instruction—towards the development of a "critical faculty" in both senses of the term.

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Between presenting all the above as a fairly incoherent talk at Michigan State University in Winter 2008/9 and writing it down a year later, I read Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* in heartening confirmation of the trajectory suggested so far. In line with the rest of the paraphrasing in this pamphlet, it seems useful to distill the book's main points to serve as a timely postscript.

Subtitled *Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Rancière's book tells the story of Joseph Jacotot, a French school-teacher who, by an inspired accident, finds that he's able *to teach things he doesn't know himself*. In exile from France in the wake of the Restoration, Jacotot was invited to teach a class at a university in the Flemish town of Louvain. Because neither he nor his students spoke the other's language, Jacotot searched for a common item to serve as a teaching tool, and came up with a recent bilingual edition of François Fénelon's adaptation of Homer's *Telemachus*. He then set his class the task of reading and discussing it *in French*.

Starting with the first word, relating it to the next, then deducing the relationships between individual letters to form words, words to form sentences, and so on, Jacotot made his students discuss the work they were learning—initially reciting it by heart, then using terms derived from the text itself. The experiment was a success: within a couple of months his students had a substantial grasp of both the book and the French language. The learning process, Jacotot observed, was played out strictly between Fénelon's intelligence and the students' intelligence, essentially without his mediation. This led him to conclude that "everything is in everything"—a principle that recognizes the fundamental commensurability and relativity between things. Once something—anything—is learned, it can be compared and related to everything else. Jacotot's role as "master" involved little more than directing the students' inherent will to learn by asking them to continually respond to three questions: 1. What do you see?

2. What do you think of it? 3. What do you make of it?

Jacotot's method was thus founded on an very rudimentary idea: because the art of *Telemachus* was the product of a natural aptitude common to all humans, everything required to "understand" it—for the transmission of a writer's ideas to a reader's mind—was contained within itself. The book didn't require explication from a third party (a figure Rancière calls the "old master," a cipher for prevailing approaches to pedagogy). In other words, the work could speak for itself, and with *adequate attention* anyone could understand it. Every willing student possesses the same natural savvy to comprehed an artefact in the same way he or she had autodidactically learned to speak as a child: via an initially blind process of mimicking, repeating, correcting, and confirming in order to interact meaningfully with another human with the same basic intelligence.

These ideas became the foundation of what Jacotot called "universal teaching." All humans are equally intelligent, he surmised, and the unfulfilled potential of this intelligence is only ever the result of laziness or distraction, compounded by the myth of personal inferiority or incapability. The phrase "I can't," says Jacotot/Rancière, is meaningless. *Anything can be learned by anyone propelled by desire or constraint*. What is commonly called "ignorance" is more correctly diagnosed as "self-contempt"—the notion that an individual doesn't have the "ability" or even "right" to learn by or for him- or herself. The Old Master's method was based on what Jacotot/Rancière calls "stultification," whereby the teacher constantly withholds "knowledge" supposedly too difficult for the student to understand, revealing and explicating little by little, careful to always remain a step ahead. This technique is at once analogous to *and* the cause of any general social order founded on inequality, manifest in the greater or lesser possession of, say, knowledge, power, or money.

Universal teaching is founded on *equality as a presupposition rather than a goal*. Jacotot's method, and Rancière's resuscitation of it, thus amounts to a position at once philosophical, pedagocial, and political. Where the Old Master maintains the division between the supposedly "wise" and the supposedly "ignorant," the new model proposes *emancipation*, first via the simple realization that one is *capable* of learning, then the ability to educate oneself by observing the relations between empirical facts. Instead of meekly accepting received wisdom, the emancipated student is thus made conscious of the true potential of the human mind—which in turn is the only faculty necessary to emancipate someone else (and so on).

Jacotot/Rancière further insists this method is most suited to being passed on from person to person (ideally parent to child) rather than from one to many (i.e., from an institution to society-at-large). He emphasizes, too, the distinction between private "man" and public "citizen". The latter will always tend towards entropy, he says, and so always become essentially *distracted* from the axiom of equality, so whatever the social context, inequalities will always emerge. And while Jacotot/Rancière recognizes the need for social particpation, he holds that the emancipated man is always simultaneously *disinterested*, that is, aware enough to remain fundamentally independent.

The most ubiquitous and insidious form of distraction to undermine universal teaching is the notion of what is commonly called "progress." Numerous attempts to establish Jacotot's principles in the 19th century became preoccupied (i.e. distracted) with determining (evaluating, classifying) the degree of his method's "progressiveness." It was thus reduced to one stage in a perceived *continuum* of progression—as a means towards an end rather than an end in itself. It's this very desire to *quantify* progress that forces the method back into the pattern of chasing goals, thereby setting up those distracting differences, hierachies, and inevitable inequalities. (There's a clear parallel here with the present-day mandate to quantify education under the catch-all banner of "research.")

When the term "emancipation" became equivocal—without any useful common meaning—Jacotot began to refer instead to his teachings as "panecastic" (literally, "everything in each"), and preferred to think of them as "stories" rather than a philosophy or ideology. One of the more artful and affecting aspects of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is noted at the end of translator Kristin Ross's introduction. She points out that Rancière consciously adopts Jacotot's technique of storytelling by subtly confusing the narrative voice, which invokes a timeless, compound form of address. Despite regular indications of both full and fragmented quotations (generally attributed to Jacotot only in the endnotes), it becomes increasingly difficult to discern who exactly is "speaking"—Rancière or Jacotot? The implication: the universal *idea* is speaking, not any particular person.

In this way, Rancière embodies two of the book's enduring lessons. First, by telling a story rather than writing an essay, he puts himself on the level of the reader, recounting the tale person-to-person rather than philosopher-to-student. Second, by scrambling the voice in this way, he discards the regular idea of accumulated, gradual history (reflected in his rejection of accumulated, gradual education). The impersonal open-sourced paraphrase embodies the positive power of the perpetuation of ideas—a form in which, in whoever's words, all is and are equal.

From the Toolbox of a Serving Library

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A third pamphlet concerned with art/design education
compiled by The Serving Library in conclusion to
"Towards a Critical Faculty (Only an Attitude of Orientation)"
Published by The Banff Centre and The Serving Library,
Summer 2011

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> These are attitudes—but how do they become skills?
> (Sennett, 2008)

This is the last in a modest trio of pamphlets that consider
some past and present models of art/design education in the
attempt to forge a new one. The first, *Towards a Critical Faculty*,
was a compendium of both familiar and obscure fragments of
arts-educational intent from across the 20th century, while the
second, *(Only an Attitude of Orientation)*, proposed a number
of "working principles"—attitudes—that a contemporary
faculty might reasonably work to foster in light of this overview.
And where the initial document was mostly a reader of
quotes drawn from the field of pedagogy itself, its successor
alternately paraphrased some related insights drawn from a
wider range of disciplines such as literature, cultural studies
and philosophy. The idea was to have digested these influences
enough to pass them on, as a kind of practical caricature of
the teaching process. Both previous installments can be freely
downloaded from www.dextersinister.org/library. Continuing
this cumulative process, this final pamphlet's title, *From the
Toolbox of a Serving Library*, completes the series' compound
sentence, finding form as a prospectus-of-sorts for an emerging
Foundation Course-of-sorts.

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Philosophical interest in the classic reciprocal Duck-Rabbit
image can be summarized as follows. First you perceive one
animal, then the other, but your perception of the second is
affected by having seen the first, then, looking back at the
first again, your perception is further affected by having seen
both. This third pamphlet follows the same triangular logic:
a reconsideration of the first one's "scientific" intentions
with the second one's "romantic" outcomes in mind, in
order to draw a total gestalt. Or—to literally cannibalize its
predecessors—this pamphlet assumes the contemporary forms
of *attitude*, *practice*, and *deconstruction*, abiding Thierry de
Duve's survey of art school paradigms in the first pamphlet:

ACADEMY	BAUHAUS	CONTEMPORARY
talent	creativity	attitude
technique	medium	practice
imitation	invention	deconstruction

– towards these ends outlined in the second one:

> its students self-reflexively designing
> their own program as an intrinsic part of its instruction—as
> a movement towards a "critical faculty" in both senses of
> the term.

In the first pamphlet, we considered what the (then) popular
but woolly term "design thinking" might augur for art/
design education by collaging some diverse (and largely
incommensurate) characteristics suggested by a motley roster
of writers. Since then, prompted by the free-ranging spirit of its
successor, we happened across another inventory that feels both
more timely and closer to home. In "A Cautious Prometheus,"
a talk delivered to an audience of design historians, the
contemporary French sociologist Bruno Latour reduces the
particular "discipline" of design to five fundamentals:

> *Humility*—that designing involves doubt, speculation,
> planning, sketching, iteration etc., rather than
> arrogant assertion;
>
> *Attention to detail*—that all aspects are equally relevant
> and subject to scrutiny;
>
> *Semiotic capacity*—that a design lends itself to
> interpretation;
>
> *State of flux*—that to design something is really always
> to REdesign a previous version; and
>
> *Ethical implication*—that any design essentially provokes
> the response "good" or "bad."

Latour cites a pretty convincing real-world example as to
why these qualities are particularly pertinent right now: the
ecological crisis, with its chronic imperative to deal immedi-
ately, pragmatically, with hard practicalities rather than soft
abstractions. Resolution is not an option here, only constant
monitoring and perpetual repair. He further claims *we have
never been modern*, meaning that the "official" critical project
kick-started by the Enlightenment—that of Modernity in
general, and by extension its Modernist arts wing in particular—
was always fundamentally flawed. As long as we continue to
proceed according to its myth of incremental progress towards
perceived ideals—of absolute solutions governed by verifiable
facts—Latour contends that any emancipatory ambition will
remain fundamentally disabled: a lost cause. In one modest
gesture towards "changing our way of changing," he proposes
a semantic shift from the hoary notion of *progress* to a more
tentative *progressive*. Hence the nicely absurd image of a *wary*
Prometheus as Latour's designer mascot, cautiously sketching
rather than heroically building. Our course, then, assumes a
comparable demeanor—the stereotype of the well-adjusted
Librarian squaring off against the gung-ho Bauhausler.

2
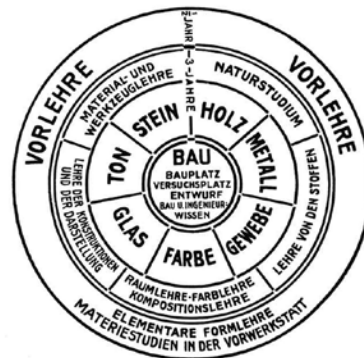
Here's our point of view. Given that the Bauhaus was set up
specifically in reaction to the particular social and cultural
conditions of ±1920s Germany, why does its Foundation Course
("more or less amended, more or less debased," according to
De Duve) remain the default model in, say, ±2020s U.S.A.?
If we reconsider what might constitute a good foundation today,
initially ignoring the regular distinctions of both under- and
postgraduate, and art and design, and at a necessary remove
from the crippling bureaucracy that attends most schools in the
early 21st century, what *progressive* form might it take?

The Bauhaus was a paternal model. To paraphrase a sentiment
often ascribed to Lord Reith, one-time Director General of the
BBC, it attempted *to give the public not what it wanted, but
what it ought to have*—it knew what was best. From a position
of intellectual authority, the school (like the BBC) determined
what society required, and developed a fit-for-purpose plan of
action in order to utilize industry towards constructive ends.

A century on, we might conclude that such top-down authority in the arts has been undermined by the bottom-up primacy of market demand; so much so, in fact, that the implied arrow of production has now surely reversed, from *Industry-serves-Society* to *Market-dictates-Industry*. It's a crude generalization, but one we assume is broadly felt and widely acknowledged enough to reasonably guide our approach here. In line with this inversion, our instinct is to similarly work "the other way round." Rather than the usual Promethean talk of a return to zero, launching an initiative from scratch, we'll work backwards from the prevailing condition, retreating in order to observe and tinker with what's already in place. We're children of Deconstruction, after all.

3

And here's our frame of reference. Digital arts software exerts a fundamental influence on contemporary cultural work. The vast majority of anyone even vaguely touching art and design use the same few programs from the broad and ever-blurring set of disciplines such as fine art, graphic design, photography, writing, editing, etc.—or any of the alternative categories put forward by George Kubler (envelopes, sculpture, painting) or Norman Potter (things, places, messages) noted in the previous pamphlet. From the vantage of the contemporary art/design software, the formerly discrete parts are less important than the whole Creative Suite, a flattening abetted by the erosion of the amateur/professional divide.

Compared to the hard tools of the Bauhaus (whether colour wheel, paintbrush, camera, or planer), today's soft simulations lack any significant distinction from one another: the paintbrush *is* the eyedropper *is* the eraser—one of a continuously expanding collection of pixel-modifiers, or effects. According to Tim Griffin (writing in *Artforum*), today's digital "effect" effectively synthesizes its various etymological roots—*a result*; *goods or moveable property*; *a mode or degree of operation on an object*; *the physical result of an action of force*—to produce similarly indistinct hybrids of production & product, catalyst & consequence. Effects become ends in themselves: After Effects with no identifiable Befores. Fluency in *this* toolbox, then, disregards the technical proficiency of an earlier Bauhausian model and replaces it with a kind of forensic faculty. In place of "How can I do this?" the more useful question now is "What did I just do?"

We're going to use one of the software monopolies, Adobe's Creative Suite bundle, as shorthand for current arts software in general—and even more specifically, the "Photoshop toolbox" as a colloquial proxy. The advantage of CS in the face of other current contenders like Adobe Premiere, Microsoft Office or Final Cut Pro is that it usefully circumscribes the trickle-down effects of three formerly distinct domains (Photography, Drawing, Typography) in one compound package (Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign)—a gamut already rich with implications. For instance, consider what Bauhaus DNA remains in these disciplinary updates (Effects? Vectors? Makeup?). What's been gained and lost in this genealogy? Here's some more precog from the other pamphlets:

So my naive idea of the 1960s—that designers were part of the solution to the world's chaotic uncontrollability—was precisely the wrong way round. Today's designers have emerged from the back room of purist, centralist control to the brightly lit stage of public totem-shaping.

the encroaching sense of culture appearing to have been distinctly *designed* by media, retail or advertising—a state of high mediation, of "culture" wrapped in quotation marks.

the role of designers has by now rotated 180 degrees from solving problems to creating desires, and whether resulting in commerical or intellectual objects, they are always surplus, unnecessary, and without urgency.

All of which suggests a wholesale shift from the construction of images and objects to their rote mediation; from depth to surface. How to reintroduce an ethical dimension in which the form is determined by the depth of engagement rather than an aggregate of expectation? If we accept that broad switch to *Market-dictating-Industry*, a package as entrenched in contemporary culture as CS must, by virtue of being a massively popular product, mirror the consensus of market demand—its "creative" components at any given point reflect the *most wanted* techniques. What exactly *are* these techniques, why have they prevailed, and what relation, if any, do they bear to their manual precedents? The aim is to navigate an education according to such questions, following a course guided by whatever seems intellectually and practically instructive in the commercial toolboxes of the time. Not in order to capitulate to market demand, naturally, but to interrogate its preferences; to query tools whose uses have become bland, unthinking; to work *from* the situation rather than *towards* it. The course as a whole, then (the container, the box) is itself a tool for thinking, as well as a means to prompt the use of that tool.

Lest all this might seem suspiciously abstract, arbitrary or absurd, it's worth mentioning that the founding conceit here —*reconceiving the Bauhaus Foundation Course via the Photoshop toolbox*—is drawn from actual experience. A couple of years ago, a friend who's a working artist was appointed to the full-time faculty of the Fine Art department in a major U.S. university, and one of her inaugural obligations was— surprise!—to teach an undergraduate class in Design. Such a situation isn't untypical, and though the overarching causes are more or less obvious, it's worth summarizing this one particular effect: a "teacher" "teaching" a subject she has never herself been taught, and has no particular involvement with or much interest in otherwise. The extent of any guidance was to be handed the couple of sheets that constituted her predecessor's stab at a curriculum which comprised—surprise!—the Bauhaus Foundation Course: colour wheels, grayscales, circles, triangles, squares, *more or less amended, more or less debased*. And so: "[exasperated] you know [sigh] it would probably be more useful to teach the kids by [sigh] going through the components of the fucking Photoshop toolbox …"

4
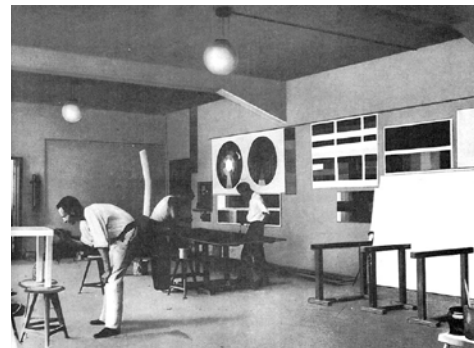
Aside from the reconsideration of its tools, the box metaphor was prompted by three other frequently recurring art school disillusions. One is the demise of the *inclination and ability* —a downward spiral—of students to articulate their own

or others' work, especially in a group. A second—surely an outcome of the first—is the demise of both the *inclination and ability* to consider such work relative to culture at large. And a third is the absence of shared intentions, of staff and students working towards perceived, declared ends (however abstract or diverse): a sense of who is teaching what (and why and how) in relation to everyone else. In short, how the parts fit together to form a construcive whole.

So: literally *for the sake of argument*, our initial contention —or suspicion—is that colour wheels and other principal features of "basic design" are today less constructive than a *communal* effort to observe and relate the contemporary condition by practicing the forms of reading, writing, and speaking that facilitate its articulation. The most appropriate foundation we can imagine right now is one that fosters the *inclination and ability* to participate—to articulate current social and cultural phenomena as a group in order to work parallel to them individually. And aside from its ready stock of metaphorical tools, our cartoon toolbox icon is also handy in constituting a readymade framework—a matrix that shows that sum as well as the parts, an image that can be held in mind by the entire "department." Ditching the specificity of Photoshop or even CS, then, we'll begin only with this nominal *idea* of the toolbox—an outline—and customize our own hybrid with bits from various domains and softwares along the way.

We're clearly not interested in "teaching the tools" so much as trying to defamiliarize them, to make them as strange as we suspect they actually are. And so we'll start with a handle—a carrier—then clip on new components as and when they're abstracted into a teaching class, forming an expandable and adaptable diagram rather than the locked-in panopticon of Johannes Itten's Bauhaus schematic. In fact, flip back to that Bauhaus onion for a moment, with its progression through layers of years towards a final imperative: BUILD. With Prometheus in mind again, what might it mean to invert the metaphor, starting from the inside and *designing* our way out— asking why as well as how? Because the idea of this course is that it works itself out in practice, *that this process itself constitutes part of its "teaching."* In this first installment, we'll necessarily start with those components that allude to more general, structural "skills." Meaning the hand, pointer or lasso rather than pencil, brush or knife—those already a degree of metaphorical remove beyond that of the more obvious artistic tools. As time goes on, this priority ought to switch to become more materially grounded.

5
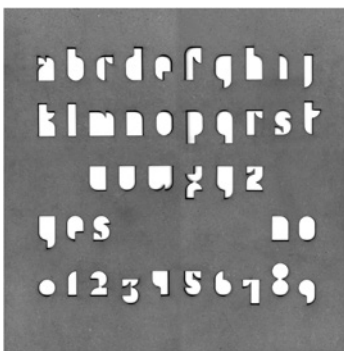
Last summer I took part in a two-week temporary academy in the company of a dozen youngish artists and a faculty that comprised a painter, a collagist, a writer, a designer, a poet, and a Greek philosopher. The overarching theme of the fortnight, titled *When your Lips are my Ears, our Bodies become Radios*—attuned to national identity and group activity— was played out through a kind of extreme sports version of a weekly workshop. The group had arranged to submit three pieces of work each day to be channeled through three local media formats: a meter-high poster displayed on dedicated columns around town, a 10-minute audio segment aired on a community radio station, and a certain number of column inches in the local newspaper. This incessant production was deliberately designed to force the sort of abstract discussion

we might expect from the group art seminar into concrete, public, "answerable" forms. Because the matters arising had to be more or less immediately communicated to an external audience, they were forced through a high-pressure mangle of translation. In the process, the issues discussed during the day were actively *handled* and immediately *channeled*.

Then last month I attended a two-day conference on French philosopher Jacques Rancière titled *Everything is in Everything* after the motto of Joseph Jacotot, the quietly radical eighteenth-century pedagog and subject of Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. I've already recounted, in a lengthy postscript to the previous pamphlet, how that book sums up and now informs our attitude here, but to briefly recap in the terms that dominated this event: Rancière, speaking for and through Jacotot, posits a "horizontal" egalitarian pedagogy against a "vertical" hierarchical one. In the traditional vertical model, an authoritative master typically *stultifies* by dispensing knowledge piecemeal, progressing step by step towards a complete intelligence, while in Rancière's horizontal alternative, the "ignorant" master *emancipates* by insisting that intelligence is the precondition of learning rather than its goal. In this formulation the student essentially teaches him- or herself, while the "master" creates the conditions for this to occur by providing articulate objects (a book or other device) that will "reveal an intelligence to itself."

What struck me at the conference, though, was how the principles being espoused and debated were unwittingly enacted by the presentations themselves. It became increasingly difficult, in fact, to pay attention without reflexively evaluating to what extent the various speakers were acting in line with their subject, i.e. whether they were behaving like an explicating authority or a fellow ignorant. The social implications of Rancière's thinking were also manifest in the more mundane aspects of conference decorum: speakers overrunning their slots, panel discussions without discussion, opaque academic jargon, and sundry opinions and mannerisms that seemed suddenly heightened either in accord or at odds with Rancière's teaching. The net effect was a kind of meta-conference in addition to the ostensible one, which merely demonstrated the difficulty of putting principles into practice even if you wholeheartedly adhere to them in theory. But the point remains: Rancière's writing is carefully contrived to prise the reader—or proselytizer—out of inertia and into action, impelled to practice what's being preached.

And the other week I went to a two-hour talk, *On (Surplus) Value in Art*, by a well-regarded cultural theorist at a local art school. He began by briefly describing the two fundamental Marxist notions of value—"use" and "exchange"—in order to consider whether, in light of social and cultural developments since Marx's time, it's possible to conceive other types of value outside this binary distinction. The rest of the lecture comprised a number of suggestions, nicely prefaced (and summed up) by the notion of "whistling in the shower" as representing the sort of romantic activity that occurs outside our normal conceptions of *time spent productively*. While the examples presented in the talk involved situations or objects that carried these alternative values, considering this idea from a user's or observer's perspective, most of the students' questions afterwards—which lasted as long as the talk itself—wondered what it might mean to *produce* according to this dissident ethos, to *make things* not primarily instrumental or profitable. As it turned out, the talk was merely a set-up for a group discussion the following day, dedicated to precisely this question.

The exaggerrated workshop that forces abstract into concrete; the auto-implication of Rancière's horizontal idealism, student and teacher together investigating a strangely articulate object; and the thought experiment that unhinges now in relation to the recent past: these three encounters strike us as exemplary working models, ways in which our course might play out in terms of practical projects.
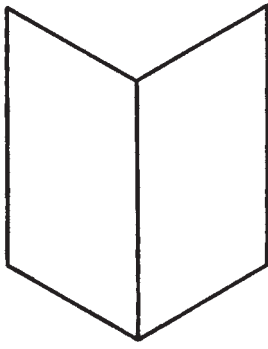
Our toolbox will be housed within the larger environment of a newly-minted not-for-profit umbrella institution, The Serving Library (and stored behind the bar). The Library consists in two complementary spaces, virtual and actual. The former (www.servinglibrary.org) is a depository of freely downloadable PDFs—or "bulletins"—assembled bi-annually in themed batches to serve as a rough semester's worth of reading matter. The latter (currently a mobile library, but on its way to a fixed location) comprises two collections—of books and artefacts— both derived from 10 years and 20 issues of our house journal, previously known as *Dot Dot Dot*, now superseded by a bi-annual hard copy of the PDFs called *Bulletins of The Serving Library*. These two collections will continue to grow as each issue of the *Bulletins* suggests a new round of books and artefacts to scavenge.

The books are shelved according to a simple binary: either (0) older, "classic," most-frequently-referred-to works of, e.g. literature (Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*), cultural studies (Bracewell's *The Nineties*), philosophy (Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*), and, typically, all three combined (Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*); or (1) newer publications that passed through—and were often published by—our workshop/bookstore Dexter Sinister in New York, which was essentially the prototype of the library back when we were more preoccupied with selling than archiving. One way to relate these two types of books is to say the new ones are directly marked by the spirit of the old zeros; another is to level them into a single collection by way of hardback library leatherette.

The artefacts are mostly flat, framed, and hung in the haphazard manner of the assorted junk that hides the fading wallpaper in old British pubs. They are wildly diverse in size and medium, from a huge red wax crayon rubbing of a *Monument to Cooperation* (the original relief fronts a housing estate around the corner from Dexter Sinister) to a modest update headed *Monument to Information* on an enamel plaque. Other objects include paintings, lithographs, woodcuts, polaroids, record covers, and LSD blotter art. And because each one originally appeared, scanned or photographed, as an illustration in an issue of *Dot Dot Dot* or one of the *Bulletins*, they come with more or less elaborate backstories in tow—useful items to point at during a seminar.

Both books and artefacts are *cooperative collections* in two senses. First, that they constitute the pooled resources, influences, and enthusiasms of a relatively large group of writers (say, 100 people) over a relatively long period of time (about 10 years). Second, that they have been sought, swapped and bought, bound and framed, courtesy of a number of sympathetic institutions over the past few years (thanks again!) as and when germinal versions of the Library were staged in various corners of Europe. During our course, the idea is to freely draw on both books and artefacts. Mid-seminar, I might recall something, run to the shelf, grab one of the "past" books—say Pirsig's *Zen*, again—, spend five minutes trying to find the page, then read:

> The result is rather typical of modern technology, an overall dullness of appearance so depressing that it must be overlaid with a veneer of "style" to make it acceptable. And that, to anyone who is sensitive to romantic Quality, just makes it all the worse. Now

it's not just depressingly dull, it's also phony. Put the two together and you get a pretty accurate description of modern American technology: stylized cars and stylized outboard motors and stylized typewriters and stylized clothes. Stylized refrigerators filled with stylized food in stylized kitchens in stylized houses. Plastic stylized toys for stylized children who at Christmas and birthdays are in style with their stylish parents. You have to be awfully stylish yourself not to get sick of it once in a while. It's the style that gets you; technological ugliness syruped over with romantic phoniness in an effort to produce beauty and profit by people who, though stylish, don't know where to start because no one has ever told them there's such a thing as Quality in this world and it's real, not style. Quality isn't something you lay on top of subjects and objects like tinsel on a Christmas tree. Real Quality must be the source of the subjects and objects, the cone from which the tree must start.

… or might point to the square object with the stencil alphabet and explain that it's a ouija board made by Paul Elliman while a design professor at Yale a decade or so ago in order to engage Josef and Anni Albers in a séance with his class; that it utilizes a version of Josef's modular geometrical typeface to render A–Z, 0–9, a "yes" and a "no," laser-cut from one of the three proportional formats, and in the same material—hardboard— used for his well-known series of colour paintings.

… or might refer to one of the "present" books—say, the essay collection *Notes for an Art School*, and show how all aspects of its material form—size, colours, paper, margins— were directly drawn from the very particular restrictions of the eccentric printing machine that produced it; and relate this to the historically-organic form of the oujia board; and oppose these to the kind of surface style lamented by Pirsig; and onto a discussion about the relative presence and value of both today in art, in society, and so on. All of which ought to occupy a morning, at least.

*

We've been missing a shared goal for some time now—to establish a plan as concerted as a Bauhaus mandate, bearing in mind the lessons of such previous experiments and the cultural changes since. We intend to assemble a bunch of tangible skills (critical faculties, orienting attitudes, whatever) relevant to working right now. Not in reaction or capitulation, but more as a means of staying awake, alert, concerned, committed. It should be apparent that this is a hard surface with a soft centre—a structure with no curriculum. As ever, it's a case of trying to establish and maintain an equilibrium of freedom and order; careful to ensure that "letting things work themselves out" doesn't morph into an excuse for letting original intentions slide.

Here's how we imagine all this working. We'll invite guests from different fields to come and help deconstruct their respective digital toolboxes by isolating a component in order to consider, together with the class, its analogue past, virtual present, and possible future. The "past" aspect will consider the lineage of the tool in question as a physical object or process, whether prosaic (type), allusive (hand) or madcap (magic wand). The "present" will consider its digital corollary, whether a direct translation of an analogue technique, a more complex metaphorical interpretation, an effect that has superseded its physical referent, or an autonomous function with no ostensible counterpart. And the "future" will, of course, be pure speculation—science fiction—according to the whim of the teacher's particular ignorance.

In response to the closing question, "Are you an idealist?," in a recent interview, the Danish art critic Lars Bang Larsen replied:

> The question remains, how to combine idealism with the scepticism and self-reflection that turns it into an artistic tool rather than an end in itself?

In which case, this prospectus will ideally serve as a kind of all-purpose wrench.

The Banff Centre, Summer 2011

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Visual Arts, July 4 – August 12

David Reinfurt
Stuart Bailey
Anthony Huberman
Robert Snowden
Angie Keefer
Junior Aspirin Records
Rob Giampietro

Group seminars will take place each weekday morning within the model of the library that we'll assemble together in the Walter Phillips Gallery during the first week.

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WEEK 1:
Introductions, library assembly, exhibition opening.

WEEK 2:

The T here stands here not just for TYPE, but rather for its mother discipline Typography, or how words are written into the world. Typography isn't only concerned with typefaces, traditions, or technical methods; it more broadly describes how an idea that takes abstract shape in the mind is transposed —via language—into the concrete world. If language is the looking glass that constructs our thinking, typography is the crucible where the Platonic essence of an idea meets its William Jamesian actualization.

Have you ever watched a 5-year-old learning to write? *First, draw a mountain, up-up-up. Stop. Now back down-down-down. Stop. Next, draw a line right across the middle, from this side to that side. Perfect: an "A."* Then, as the child makes her way through the rest of the alphabet, practicing and practicing, she is at the same time also learning to recognize and to read. And as she moves from drawing to writing, it's as if the *mechanick exercise* of moving her hand to make these strange marks literally draws the glyphs closer. Reading and writing are fused in a mechanical-cerebral alliance whose alchemical result is typography. I'm reading and writing right now.

"Pure" information is a misnomer. Every transmitted idea must be carried in a container. And that container inevitably asserts itself back onto the idea it contains. John Cage put it simply:

> It is like a glass of milk.
> You need the glass, and you need the milk.

In order to think about typography, together we'll perform a series of simple exercises designed to recover the essential strangeness of our alphabet by following typographic assignments from Paul Elliman, Bruno Munari, Robert Bringhurst, Dennis Oppenheim (and son), Oliver Sacks, Beatrice Warde, and Donald Knuth. (DR)

WEEK 3:

The LASSO is loosely appropriated here as a device that captures a moving object (in its analogue sense) or an irregular one (in its digital sense)—in our case, "the cultural condition." Brian Eno draws a capital distinction between "culture" (imperative) and "Culture" (gratuitous), and this class is concerned with the former—which is to say society in general rather than art in particular. Together we'll attempt to grasp its dominant characteristics, such as these three I happened across the other day in a book review: *The corporatized society … The post-natural environment … The pharmacologically-altered human landscape.* To bring us up to speed we'll consider some previous attempts both distant and recent, including those of Henry Adams (1907), Umberto Eco (1962), Michael Bracewell (2001), Mark Fisher (2009), and James Gleick (2011).

Bruno Latour has recently called for a shift from thinking in terms of "matters of fact" to "matters of concern"—away from the limited perception of self-contained phenomena, and towards the fullest possible scenography of hybrids, connections and networks. He then asks, "What is the *style* of matters of concern?," i.e., how might we model them in order to get a grip (if not exactly reign them in)? Past examples of visual representation, such as perspective drawing, projective geometry, CAD imaging, Google Earth, he claims, come nowhere near capturing the essence of current processes.

The practical part of our class will respond to Latour's question, attempting to model key features of our culture's near past and near future—the continuous present—in a manner appropriate to it. *Threatening for the effects.* What form might this take, bearing in mind the same knot used for a lasso also makes a noose? (SB)

WEEK 4:

Some say that it's rude to POINT. But to select is far more so. A common misconception about curating is that it's about selecting artworks, when, in fact, it's about finding them, pointing to them, and moving them elsewhere—literally, poetically, conceptually, and carefully.

Much of the difficulty with making an exhibition lies in the fact that to select and extract something from circulation —an object, image, practice, or idea—and stop it, examine it, and exhibit it, is to do it a great injustice. A range of writers have recently been discussing the life of *things*, referring, in the largest sense, to all that which is usually not considered to be cognizant human subjects: objects, pictures, rocks, animals, natural systems, etc. These things—objects, images, and ideas included—have their own agency and won't simply sit still under someone else's microscope, on someone else's terms. In fact, what makes them compelling is precisely what animates them, what they want, and where they go when they are set loose into the world. In other words, objects, images, and ideas have lives to live, and instead of selecting them, explaining them, and using them to prove a curatorial argument, let's try something far more respectful, affective, and generative: use your pointer, raise your glass, and give a toast.

We'll have the things on the walls of The Serving Library and the spirit of Fischli & Weiss as our guides, and we'll see where that takes us. In other words, the opening of our exhibition will mark the beginning of our curatorial idea, not its end. (AH)

WEEK 5:

We call anything functional, from software to ideas, a tool. This flex is recent. In antebellum America the word "tool" denoted an implement that could make one thing at a time. Reconstruction-era industrialization broadened the meaning of the word to include any implement involved in the manufacture of a product, which necessitated the coinage "hand tool" to distinguish traditional implements from what came to be known as machines. The difference between these two

mechanical species, it seems to me, may be more a matter of culture than of engineering. Machines are both the rival and the antithesis of humanity. In their complexity they resemble us. In their simplicity (all those moving parts, and yet no Oedipus complex, no fear of death, no ecstasy), they are as William Blake put it, "satanic." Machines are largely autonomous and threaten us with obsolescence, whereas a tool is nothing without us. Depending on how technologically deterministic you like to get, a computer is either a tool on its way to becoming a machine or just a machine. And software like Adobe Photoshop is a tool comprised of lots of smaller, more specialized, interworking tools like the CROP Tool.

Left column. Third from the top. The icon resembling the annoying way photographers mime their hands up into a frame and move it around whenever the muse comes calling. It *allows you to select an area of an image and discard everything outside this area*—a sloppy tool for really basic needs. I've used it only once, while expunging Uncle Doug's third wife from a photo he wanted to frame for his newish girlfriend.

Michel Foucault argued that man is essentially a thinking animal who lives in a world that is intelligible to him only because he imposes his own order upon his experiences. When asked to teach a Photoshop Tool at a temporary school inside an art institution in the middle of the woods in 🇨🇦 , I thought that considering Foucault's term *Heterotopia* would be a way for us to get naked about being in such a clean, well lit place. The term comes from a lecture he gave in 1967:

> There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.

A heterotopia is, then, a kind of manicured environment, anywhere where you feel like you are inside a big set of parentheses, an enclosed theater of human folly, aspiration, and formation. Practically, this class will involve a lot of reading (which is, of course, it's own set of parenthesis) and talking about reading. What we read will be based on examples of the term, and our present digs: The Library. The Campus. The Cruise Ship. (RS)

WEEK 6:

The SPINNING PINWHEEL—and its other incarnations: the tumbling hourglass, the cycling wristwatch, the progress bar —isn't an implement, it's a show. It appears intermittently, without warning, to signal a state of preoccupation, so that you, who were formerly in charge, but are now temporarily relegated to the audience, may be gently assured that any further inputs will be moot until the spinning wheel fulfills its distractive function, then disappears, whereupon the simulation of your tool-wielding agency may re-commence. If there is one element in the digital software user experience that cannot be avoided, this is it; you will encounter the pinwheel and its ilk. They are meant to persuade you that your computer is taking a moment to think.

This class will concern presentation, working from the assumption that how we talk about whatever it is we do, is an integral part of doing it, and therefore, whenever we attempt to talk about, we are inevitably talking within. Rather than spinning our wheels—dissociating talking from doing, thinking from making, and seeming from being—we'll consider the

potential for more usefully associative models of showing, telling, observing and listening.

As a background for our class activity, we will refer to talks given by Ludwig Wittgenstein and Vladimir Nabokov, concerning indefensible statements of wonder, including that familiar standby of the artist's repertoire: "Lately, I've been interested in …" (AK)

Plus, on WEDNESDAY EVENINGS:

Just as it's important to know how to read, write, speak and do, we all need to know how to *listen*. (What are hands for, if not to hide the eyes?) With those ubiquitous white headphone leads dangling from our ears as we walk the streets and ride the subway, today we're plugged in and listening in ways unimaginable even a decade ago. Compact discs are now more commonly used as drinks coasters and vinyl records survive mainly as connoisseur collectibles; recorded sound has shed its corporeal form and new structures of listening have evolved. We *scroll* through hours of recordings using the progress bar in iTunes, dipping in and out of songs, symphonies or audio books. We *shuffle* through manifold musical genres and decades, and *share* our discoveries with friends and like-minds.

These new structures of listening may have things to tell us about the way we produce and consume culture. How is narrative created? What does our ability to access, at the click of a mouse, almost any album or film that's ever been made tell us about taste, consumption and how we construct our idea of history and progress? If all that is solid really has melted into air, what of the materiality of the hardware we use in order to be "connected"? (That immaterial digital code needs to get to us somehow or other.) How does listening affect the ways we relate to each other, make things or exchange information? Four sessions of AUDIO ANNOTATION (in the dark) will ask us to use our ears in order to see things a little differently. (JAR)

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Finally, at some point in the middle of the Foundation Course, Rob Giampietro will deliver a remote lecture on the HANDLE:

After Banff

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This letter was originally written to a good friend and interlocutor Mike Sperlinger a month or so after getting back from Banff. Obviously, it has been reworked for publication.

————————

14.08.11

Mike,

I've been putting off writing to you for some time, mostly due to being preoccupied with Banff, etc.

I suppose that "etc." is already an instance of the pathologically slack style lamented in the *New York Times Magazine* piece you sent me, the patron saint of which is supposedly David Foster Wallace. I suppose I enjoyed the piece in a heart-sinking kind of way—with some sense of, yes, that sounds about right but then, well, a lot of things I come across these days *sound about right*, and frankly this doesn't seem enough.

Sure, Wallace does casual very well. Sure, it's ubiquitous, pandemic even, and plausibly rooted in his considerable influence—in the U.S. at least. And sure, emails, blogs, texting and other nascent media cultivate the same. Yes, too, we're probably due some kind of backlash return to formality that I'll likely approve of. I don't know; I'm all for critique, of course, but this kind of commentary often seems gratuitous —written to fill cultural column inches and consequently hard to muster enough passion to argue for or against. That said, I took your sending it seriously enough to want to make a concerted effort to keep at least one uptight eye on my language here. For instance, If I were doing a Wallace I wouldn't have started that last sentence with "That said," but more likely "Whatever." Actually I did, then went back and surreptitiously changed it.

But to be clear (to myself as much as to you), the main thing Wallace represents for me has less to do with his style or subject matter and more with his frequent attempts to articulate a set of clear intentions, a working ethos—a this-is-what-I'm-out-to-achieve relative to both literature-in-general and society-at-large. This doubtless comes across as the sort of woolly humanism that makes you want to throw up. And while your skepticism hasn't exactly scared me off searching for my own "clear intentions" in view of such wool, it does force me to face the fact that I ought to be able to express them in terms that don't irritate someone I'm pretty sure shares the same constructive cultural impulses. That is, in terms that are concrete and grounded rather than vague and airy.

Simply put, the idea of assembling a personal (or collective) masterplan and then patiently trying to carry it out seems to me a markedly unusual and so particularly commendable proposition nowadays—an out-of-fashion ambition, not unlike those "proper" writing standards mourned in the *New York Times*. I'm guessing you'd argue that any such ethics ought to be *in* the work rather than spoken or written about alongside it, and I'd be the first to agree. It's just that lately I feel so many artists and writers assume as given that what they do is in some sense constructive, yet excuse themselves from articulating—or even contemplating—*in what sense exactly*. Meanwhile, the work itself doesn't carry any such ethics clearly or convincingly either. Wallace, on the other hand, *publicly and explicitly* set himself (and by implication others) measures by which to gauge the success of his writing. It's this sort of vulnerability that I think pushes his work beyond mere exercises in look-how-cleverly-self-reflexive-I-am or plain old please-like-me, to name two frequent accusations. In short, it is *answerable*.

Okay, I'm generalizing wildly here, and talking mainly about students, simply because I really come up against this lack when teaching. With this in mind, then, I want to tell you about the "working ethos" we tried to first lay out and then live up to over our six weeks in Banff. To be honest it's partly an *aide memoire* for myself, but of course I'm hoping it also responds to some of the things we've been writing to each other about (in *Dot Dot Dot 20*, for instance)—at least that it's more than a literary equivalent of forcing you to look at snapshots of me windsurfing and eating ice cream.

I'll begin by sparing you another account of the intentions behind our Banff residency beyond this one-liner: *to reconsider the old-school Bauhaus-proxy notion of an Arts Foundation Course relative to a new-school Adobe-proxy Creative Suite Toolbox*. I don't mean to downplay these intentions, but there's a whole introductory pamphlet, a "Banfflet," floating around online if you're inclined to dig deeper. This was a particularly difficult thing to write—I think because the tone can't help come across as anything other than bombastic, or at least pompous. I mean, if you're going to challenge a mandate as deeply-rooted as the Bauhaus (or at least what the Bauhaus has come to stand for, regardless of its actual nuances), it's hard not to seem to be assembling some kind of counter-manifesto. Reading it this way, though, is to overlook our wholly speculative and sometimes deliberately absurd approach. The course was set up to interrogate the idea that learning how to look, read, write and talk, *and fostering the will to do so—* kindergarten stuff, really—are more usefully foundational today than learning about universals, abstractions, and craft skills; yet without assuming that this idea is necessarily correct.

Actually, let me retract that and quote one paragraph from towards the end of the Banfflet, because it draws together both something I just mentioned (explicit intentions) and something I want to go on to discuss (self-checking and balance):

> We've been missing a shared goal for some time now—to establish a plan as concerted as a Bauhaus mandate, bearing in mind the lessons of such previous experiments and the cultural changes since. We intend to assemble a bunch of tangible skills (critical faculties, orienting attitudes, whatever) relevant to working right now. Not in reaction or capitulation, but more as a means of staying awake, alert, concerned. It should be apparent that this is a hard surface with a soft centre—a structure but no curriculum. As ever, it's a case of trying to establish and maintain an equilibrium of freedom and order; careful to ensure that "letting things work themselves out" doesn't morph into an excuse for letting original intentions slide.

Last night I recalled that when Will Holder and I first shared a studio and started working together in Amsterdam, he frequently used to drive me nuts whenever any decision had to be made by saying: "Let's see what happens ...". In retrospect, I realize that whatever the decision under discussion, we can't *actually* have had to decide, otherwise we would have been forced to do so rather than possibly letting it slide. The point is, I'd tend towards having things securely buttoned down while he'd prefer to leave them as loose as possible for as long as possible. I think this was the single most important thing I've learned from Will. It also strikes me that while I would certainly *think* I was open-minded, he was patently doing it for real— allowing things to stay tentative and precarious until the very last minute. In this and many other ways he helped me bridge the gap between theory and practice.

That said, when it had all gone horribly wrong, it would be my turn to say: "Well, what did you expect?" Later I suggested we ought to have these maxims carved onto our adjacent gravestones—a great working philosophy for any double act:

LET'S	WHAT
SEE	DID
WHAT	YOU
HAPPENS	EXPECT

So all that was the pretext. In practice, Angie, David, Robert and myself each directed a week of seminars based on a single Photoshop tool, abetted by a few guests: curator Anthony Huberman in the middle week, a series of dedicated weekly podcasts by Junior Aspirin Records, a realtime ichat lecture by Rob Giampietro, a pre-recorded talk by Jan Verwoert, and a live hookup with MoMA librarian David Senior via Skype.

As you can imagine, this sort of group residency would normally kick off with a couple of days' worth of presentations by the participants (introducing their work, what they hoped to achieve there, etc.). However, among the very broad strokes of plans we'd settled on in advance was the conceit of doing this only at the *end*—the idea being that the participants would individually speak and collectively react on the basis of what we'd all gathered over the previous weeks.

We spent the first week setting up the space together. The invitation from Banff was actually two-fold—to simultaneously run a course *and* stage an exhibition in their fairly large Walter Phillips Gallery. And given the nature of our Serving Library project, in which everything tends to bleed into everything else, it made immediate sense to set up a model version of our intended physical Library in the gallery to serve both as a seminar room and a public exhibition. Accordingly, we metaphorically-visually cut a chunk out of the space's far right-hand corner and filled the two adjoining walls with our collection of framed artifacts. Then we added a large square table, three shelves of our library's books in a corridor annex, and Nick Relph & Oliver Payne's "artists impression" of The Serving Library—a looping video shot in a dilapidated library in Los Angeles with superimposed Google Sketchup books, digital bottles of red wine, and a number of silent readers.

In order to introduce the artifacts that would surround us for the next six weeks (as well as the general plan), we decided together how to install them. This involved reading aloud an "Extended Caption," which is actually more of an essay that explains the various ideas behind drawing this stuff together. The reading became a group activity too, with different people reading a few paragraphs each. For the next couple of days, we discussed the various ways we might arrange the pieces, eventually settling on simply following the caption's readymade chronology. We ordered the objects to form a lateral baseline-spine across the two walls, then arranged the rest above that spine according to various inclinations—aesthetic, connective, semantic, and so on.

During the second week, we got into the yoga-like routine of daily group seminars from 9.30 am–12.30 pm. David was first up with his class on the TYPE tool, which was concerned with Typography in general rather than Typefaces specifically—and even more broadly, the idea that all *things* possess form. The

baseline point of the class was that words only exist via the filter of a specific typeface, the trace of a hand, or a voice (not to mention extra-linguistic gestures), all of which inevitably affect the message. Whether we are conscious of it or not, these forms involve a constant back and forth with the world. That's to say, we affect forms and those forms in turn affect us, including how we continue to give form to things, and so on.

David began by duplicating a project set by Paul Elliman, one of his own teachers at Yale. We divided into three teams and were given an hour in which to assemble and demonstrate a "new alphabet" from stuff found outdoors. The first team offered a collection of objects that, due to their diverse physical properties, produced different patterns when dropped into a bucket of water. The particular way in which the water moved in each case was the "language" to be read, which among other implications meant that both sender and receiver had to be already aware of the principle of codification. The second team arranged a walk along a route marked by similar objects to those found by the first team (rocks, sticks, plants, etc.), but alternately emphasized reading as process of moving *through* a text. The third one argued a lot, and to be honest I can't recall much about their idea beyond the fact that it merely substituted found debris for our regular 26 Latin characters. Where the others focused on the system's structure, its grammar, this last attempt was more plainly a direct translation of the existing model. The common aim of all this week's set pieces (and perhaps the whole program) was *to make language strange*—to freshly notice its effects, its affects, and its defects.

It was already clear that we'd overestimated the group's capacity for supplementary reading, so we only managed to push through about half the intended texts, talks and films. In the TYPE week these included: designer Paul Elliman's 1998 essay "My Typographies," which complemented that opening project; artist Dennis Oppenheim's 1971 short film *Two-Stage Transfer*, which comprises footage of himself tracing a shape on his son Eric's back, while Eric simultaneously traces the felt shape onto a wall (in the second half of the film they switch roles); various references to computer scientist Donald Knuth's late 1970s project Metafont, a piece of software based on a set of parameters that could be manipulated to produce infinite numbers of fonts and so typical of what he called "a contemporary inclination to view things from the outside, at a more abstract level, with what we feel is a more mature understanding"; film-maker John Smith's *Slow Glass* (1988–91), a meditation on memory premised on the always-surprising fact that glass is a liquid; and Beatrice Warde's well-known 1930s essay on design ethics "The Crystal Goblet," in which she asserts that typography ought always to be "invisible" and holds up a simple wine glass as an example of an appropriately transparent container that's designed to reveal rather than obscure its contents. We also arranged an impromptu Coke/Pepsi-style Scotch/Bourbon taste challenge, which involved sampling different configurations of whiskies and glasses in order to test Warde's claim that our perception of given content is affected by the form of its container.

Two Brunos, Munari and Latour, frequently popped up during our six weeks. In the first instance, David screened some footage of Munari making invisible wax drawings with kids on Italian TV in the 1960s (not unlike the Oppenheim procedure). He also read from Munari's *Drawing a Tree*, which includes a lovely line typeset vertically in the gutter of every page: "Each new branch is slenderer than the last." The book shows and tells how, despite the fact that all trees fundamentally grow in the same manner (arboreally, from a root, branching, then branching, then branching again), each individual case ends up unique due to the exclusive conditions that surround it (soil, wind, rain, lightening, disease, animal intervention, and so on). Following Munari's instructions, we built our own 2D tree from toilet paper on the floor of the gallery—a slightly dumb group exercise that helped move things along. Generally speaking, the seminars tended to oscillate wildly between heavygoing and frivolous, with relatively complex theory and slightly ridiculous games squeezed into the same three hours.

Probably the heaviest class this week involved our reading and discussing the first half of Latour's two-part lecture *What is the Style of Matters of Concern?*, which opens with the metaphor of a bird trapped inside a house, repeatedly and desperately slamming into a window as it tries to get outside. Basically, Latour is concerned with removing the glass. This essay is one of his many arguments against the Enlightenment-based distinction of so-called *natural* and so-called *social* phenomena (i.e. the "outside" and "inside" of the "house").

Two other recurring metaphors are a bridge and a kayak. The bridge is constructed by those who perniciously try to account for natural phenomena from a social point of view, or vice versa. The kayak is Latour's preferred vantage—the implication being that both banks look markedly different if you're *going with the flow of a given issue* and so paddling between the two. It's a plea for a holistic perspective, analogous to the unification of container/contained, the symbiosis of form/content, and other anti-dualistic thinking—hence its potential utility as a foundational arts tool. The same idea was to recur in different guises relative to different domains throughout the six weeks, and in this way the concept became increasingly robust— easier to grasp and so easier to discuss. Which brings us back to David's starting point: the notion of "type," "typography" or "forms" in general as marked by a perpetual back and forth with the world.

The following week it was my turn to direct the LASSOO tool. I should point out that we're fully intending to eventually include those digital tools with more obvious material histories such as the Paintbrush, Pencil, or Dodge & Burn. But in this first attempt at building a Foundation Course it simply seemed more appropriate—maybe just more *foundational*—to begin with those tools that allowed for easy metaphorical extrapolation. In any case, my idea with the lassoo was to attempt to grasp *the contemporary condition*.

A rope lassoo is of course typically used to capture a moving and awkwardly-shaped animal—usually while the rope-thrower is moving too. The present-day Photoshop lassoo is partly analogous to its material precedent, but also different in that it's used to capture an irregular *shape* (as distinct from a rectilinear box). Cows and horses are "irregularly shaped" too, but for a cowboy motion is clearly the key factor. Anyway, you get the idea: the contemporary cultural condition is the moving, irregular animal we're trying to get a handle on.

You might also grasp that lassooing is analogous with Latour's kayaking. These kinds of easy analogies were both ubiquitous and contagious in Banff, and I think this was simply due to the daily repetition of these intensive three-hour sessions—a drill that often seemed as physical as it was cerebral. Consequently, the inevitable connections between the mass of matter that cropped up in discussion constantly hovered in our collective consciousness. What a claim! Less dramatically put, I just mean that if the classes had been once a week, or every few days, or with different people in different places, or perhaps even at different times on different days, I'm sure the puddle of inferences would have evaporated sooner.

What I had initially in mind seemed simple. As you know, I'm a big fan of the shortlist of cultural trends compiled by Michael Bracewell in *The Nineties: When Surface Was Depth*, as well as Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*, which effectively updates Bracewell's summary a decade on. Both are unusually slim and exceptionally readable volumes of socio-cultural theory, so it's possible to grasp some fairly complex ideas in the space of a week. My idea was to have our group compile an even more up-to-date list in order to first project our current condition into the immediate future (say another decade or so), then predict way beyond it (say another century). In the end, the week was a good deal more complex than that.

I began with an overview of Umberto Eco's 1962 book *The Open Work*. This is a survey of a particular strain of avant-garde art—basically, work that had been deliberately left unfinished or ambiguous in order to be completed *in situ* by the artist, performers or audience. It's no coincidence, says Eco, that such "open" forms appear in the modern era (his examples begin with Mallarmé)—in fact, they mirror an equivalent openness in science, mathematics and philosophy. Open Works are the most crucial, *useful* artworks of the time because they offer *new* forms that allow an audience to perceive the world *in a manner appropriate to it*—ideally in view to changing it.

I'm drawn less to Open Works *per se* than to the aesthetic theory Eco writes to support his cause—a theory that explains what makes truly avant-garde art more "authentic" and "socially committed" than other art in any given era. Here's an extremely compressed summary of that theory:

As citizens, says Eco, we participate in communal social systems (taxes, politics, travel, libraries) with a view to improving our overall personal situation, despite the fact that these systems tend frequently to seem hostile or malevolent. My favorite example of this since having moved to Los Angeles is driving. Obviously, we contrive to drive for the sake of convenience (to travel large distances, at great speed, perhaps with a load) yet immediately find ourselves facing countless *in*conveniences (bad traffic, expensive parking, taxes, insurance). Nevertheless, says Eco, we willingly "alienate ourselves in" society not in order to *transcend* our situation, which is impossible, but at best to *transform* it—a struggle that's generally worth the payoff.

This *fait accompli* has an analogy in art, he continues, in the sense that the authentic artist necessarily "alienates himself in" *the world of forms* (i.e. the history of art) in order to *trans*-form them. The vocation of the avant-garde is to disown existing, impotent forms, yet it remains unavoidably tethered to them in the attempt to forge newly potent ones. Here's that "perpetual back-and-forth with the world" again: you can't create in a vacuum, only hope to transform what already has some sort of communicative collateral. It's this struggle, this *movement*, says Eco, that *constitutes* the art. Canonical examples include Stockhausen's break from the 12-tone system in music, Joyce writing beyond the confines of a single linear narrative in literature, or Duchamp's readymades, which shifted the focus of fine art from the particular subject to the general system.

Anyway, my idea was to claim the quality implied by Eco's theory—"a committed, critical engagement with the present"— as another foundational quality. I offered two relatively recent examples that I think illustrate Eco's point. As exemplary works-in-progress, both are charged with the sort of energy Eco's getting at, in line with his sense of authenticity, yet "open" in quite different ways.
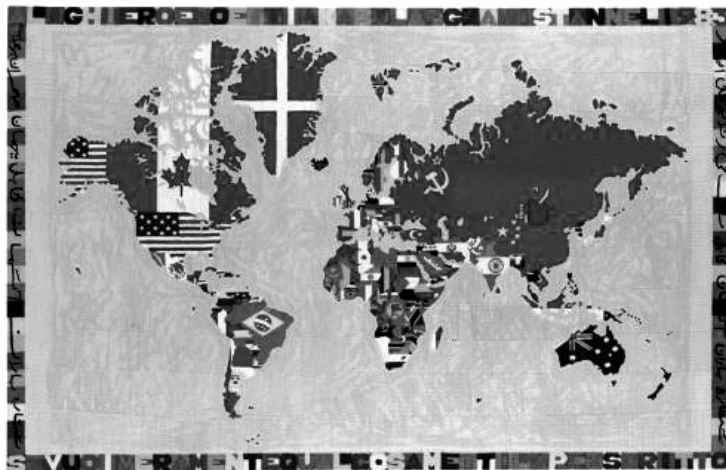
The first was Alighiero e Boetti's extensive collection of *Mappa* made during the 1970s and 80s, a sprawling series comprising some 150 textile world maps commissioned by

Boetti from Afghan artisans. The flags of the world's nation states are stiched within their current borders at the moment of production, so the series documents the ever-shifting geopolitical landscape. Boetti's way of working was timely and telling in a further sense, too—of the shift to "outsourced" production.

Kurt Schwitters on a time-chart
by Stefan Themerson
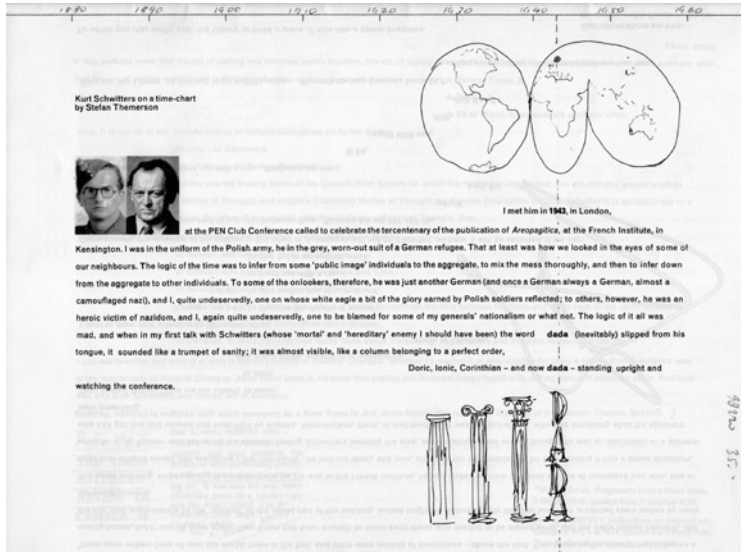
Then I introduced Stefan Themerson's "Kurt Schwitters on a Time-Chart," a personal meditation on Schwitters' work that focuses on its historical context. Like Boetti's maps, Themerson's chart is palimpsestuous, moving through various iterations over 9 years. It started life as an informal talk in 1958; this became the basis of a book; the book's thesis was turned into a formal lecture; and the lecture was ultimately translated into an extremely idiosyncratic collage-essay that runs over 20 pages of the progressive arts magazine, *Typographica*, finally published in 1967. Each new version of the work built on the previous one, amending, adding and refining as and when necessary.

The next morning we read Bracewell and Fisher. I outsourced the labour of reading by having a few members of the class summarize each of Fisher's chapters. This took a lot longer to deliver than I'd anticipated, as it provoked a great deal of debate. Somewhere around the middle of the book, the class collapsed—or evolved—into a discussion about what we as a group actually take Fisher's largely unqualified "capitalism" to mean. We duly struggled to distinguish "capital" from "capitalism" from "late capitalism" from Fisher's "capitalist realism" coining, which is itself a distillation of Frederic Jameson's observation that it's harder to conceive of the end of capitalism than the end of the world, i.e. that fundamental social change is no longer even on the radar.

The topic steamrolled over into the following morning, then we tried to compile our own list of contemporary vicissitudes, focusing on *trajectories* rather than simply listing stuff that's already happened, i.e. phenomena we're still living through and that we might be able to project on to some logical consequence or other. You can imagine the sort of thing: the ever-diminishing size and increasing speed of technology, connectivity, information overload, celebrity obsession, fundamentalism, haywire national economies and global ecologies, the changing dynamics of interpersonal relationships, the family unit, and so on and so on.

After this chaotic exercise it was time to proceed to the second part of Latour's *Matters of Concern*. Angie prefaced our reading by offering a brief introduction to his key 1991 book *We Have Never Been Modern*. According to Latour, the Enlightenment ambition of "progress" founded on scientific discovery has never been achieved; in fact, the whole notion is and always has been fundamentally flawed. The scientific laboratory, says Latour, was a cultural icon designed to publicly authorize truth-claims. And while the lab and the "facts" that it "proved"

were certainly useful for debunking long-held superstitions and myths, these "matters of fact" are now being revealed as inadequate and pernicious. When scientific experiments are conducted in isolation, i.e. in the artificial vacuum of the clinical lab, says Latour, they are immediately disconnected from other, *surrounding* facts and therefore incapable of adequately grasping a world that is, on the contrary, emphatically *connected*—in which everything affects everything else. Because our *ways of seeing* are out of whack with the nature of the phenomena being observed, he concludes, we're unable to tackle them appropriately, towards usefully dealing with—i.e. changing—the world. This sounds a lot like Eco.

The previous week had been Rodeo Week in Calgary, the nearest big city a couple of hours away. Reportedly, this was a big deal, with the whole place taken over by booze, barbeque and citywide cowboy/cowgirl olympics. And it turned out that the person in charge of overseeing the administration in the Visual Arts department, Kelly, was a full-on cowgirl—with a cowgirl twin sister—who'd taken the previous week off to be in Calgary for the events. On returning at the start our Lassoo week, she agreed to bring along her (pink) rope, and spent half an hour on Wednesday morning reigning in the various bits of furniture we'd had built for the residency (twin lecterns, a sandwich board, a street reader, a steel ring) while we asked her about the difficulty involved in, say, simultaneously riding and directing a horse *and* aiming and controlling the rope. During this Q&A she made a memorable comment about the size of the loop relative to the distance of the object: the further the object (the more difficult the aim), the bigger the loop (the greater the redundancy), and vice versa. My grasp of what this means in terms of culture remains just out of reach.

On Wednesday we also played the Mafia Game, a rudimentary role-play that was developed in the late 1980s. It was originally an academic psychology experiment designed to show how the economy of knowledge plays out in an enclosed community—and in the bastardized, popularized version such "knowledge" amounts to who's Mafia and who's not. The game was introduced to me by an Iranian student at a different summer school the previous year, and we played it a few times with the group there. He told us how the game was hugely popular in Iran at the time, not least because its paranoid dynamic mirrored what was actually going on in Iranian society.

A quick version of the game:

Everyone in the group receives a card that assigns the role of either (corrupt) mafioso or (honest) citizen. These are secretly noted, then the game cycles through "days" and "nights." During the nights, the whole group shuts their eyes. Then, at the word of the communally-appointed God in charge, the Mafia awake and silently decide on one citizen to kill. They shut their eyes again, all awake, and God announces the death, followed by much speculation and accusation about whodunnit. There's a round of voting for a suspect Mafioso, which involves a lot of double-bluffing by the others. A verdict is reached, and the accused is lynched whether or not they are innocent. Then the whole thing starts over—another night, another killing, more accusations, voting, lynching. The aim of the game, depending on your assigned allegiance, is for all Mafia to eliminate all citizens without being identified and killed off themselves; or conversely, for the citizens to successfully identify all Mafia and hang the lot.

The reason I wanted to include the game as part of the Lassoo week was to practically demonstrate something we'd been talking about in light of Eco, Bracewell, Fisher, and particularly Latour. Namely, the problem of perceiving something that's permanently changing while in the process of permanently changing yourself; the impossibility of "getting outside" the condition under observation. The idea was simply (and complexly) to play the game while more-consciously-than-usual *watching ourselves play the game*; to consider how and why it works *as* a game from the vantage of one of its working parts.

We played first on the Wednesday to get everyone used to the rules, again on Thursday once the group was a little less tentative, and then that same evening at the boisterous Canadian Legion, the only halfway decent bar in downtown Banff. With Latour's "concerns" in mind, the idea was to note how the game was affected by these different *surrounds*—in different venues, at different times of day, with 0, 1, 2, 3 rounds of drinks. At the same time, the ebb and flow of temperaments constantly changed according to previous games and burgeoning realworld relationships. All of which visibly and complexly affected the game's dynamic. Again: how to steer the horse while roping the cow.

Somewhere during the week I'd also assigned two David Foster Wallace readings from the novel *Infinite Jest*. The first depicts an absurdly sophisticated annual role-play tournament called Eschatron, which is played each year by the latest batch of adolescents at the novel's high-end residential tennis academy. Eschatron is a war game: an imaginary world map is projected over a few courts, its players assemble into various multinational blocs, then proceed to fire tennis balls (nuclear warheads) according to more or less strategic reasoning. The gathering entropy is analysed as close to realtime as possible by a kid running around with a computer on a trolley. Naturally, it all ends in total world destruction, specifically with the image of the data-processing kid's head crashed through an upended monitor, legs flailing out and up at the sky as a snowstorm obliterates the map.

The second excerpt I handed out is a very brief passage that recounts the invention and trajectory of "video telephony," an imagined technology that comes across as being far more science fiction than Skype, though I'm not sure why as it's effectively the same thing. In the story the system is hugely popular at first, but rapidly declines once users begin to realize the necessity of the regular non-visual telephone's abstract delusion that the person on the other end is totally interested in and concentrating on what you have to say. Video telephony reveals instead the fact that the person on the other end is more commonly distracted and bored. This leads to self-consciousness, lack of confidence, and myriad compensatory products (increasingly sophisticated masks and avatars), before the whole thing is abandoned as a lost cause and the population happily returns to the visual ignorance of old phones.

We read this as an example of how a certain cultural phenomenon—a technology in this case—plays out over time. Then we took our own inventory of present/future phenomena and, in the manner of Wallace's example, tried to imagine plausible trajectories for each one over the next 5, 10, 50 years. Email protocols, for instance: if, why, and when to respond—and how are such factors likely to change given how they've altered over the past decade? Or the limits of Wikipedia: what happens once an entry's knowledge hits a certain threshold of specialism? How is such knowledge aggregated—by whom, and according to what standards?

The closing assignment on Lassoo Friday was to design some kind of game ourselves—a number of base conditions and a set of operations that might model one of the contemporary tendencies we'd discussed in the past week. As time was fast running out, we decided to stick to the format of the Mafia Game but try adding an extra character that would significantly affect the game's dynamic. One of the big news stories this week was the trial of media mogul Rupert Murdoch, and we duly decided to introduce a very contemporary Murdoch role into the game. In essence, our Murdoch was above the law, but unlike the Mafia his aim is neither to eliminate nor safeguard the rest of the players, only to perpetuate the game—and his or her presence in it—for as long as is practicably possible.

And that was more or less the end of the Lassoo. With two postscripts:

First, I gave the class one last chapter to read over the weekend, taken from a book by Adam Gopnik about growing up in New

York called *Through the Children's Gate*. In the chapter, which is called "Fourth thanksgiving: propensities," Gopnik writes a portrait of his family by detailing their relationship to games. First he recalls his son having a sleepover with a friend on what's deemed (by the parents) to be a No Screen weekend, meaning no computer games, TV, movies, email, whatever.

When the kids, to his delight, report that they've spent the Saturday in a SoHo pool hall, Gopnik is thrown by his wife's stoic observation, which is something along the lines of *aren't they just doing your idea of a mindless activity rather than theirs, and anyway wasn't pool considered just as pernicious in its day as you consider those TV or computer screens to be now?* Gopnik continues to grapple with his own prejudices, dissecting the demands he makes on his kids. A second narrative line is concerned with *language* games, particularly his daughter's tendency to try out adult-ish words she doesn't yet quite know how to use correctly, like "actually" and "miscellaneous" eventually realizing that this is way a lot of Manhattan adults speak too. Finally, he recounts of his own Mafia Game episodes—in Upper East Side apartments, with a bunch of middle class media couples, and a break for Chinese food:

> Some of the game's pleasure lies simply in its not being conversation: it is a relief not to have to make small talk with your neighbors at a dinner party. Instead of telling them elaborate social lies in an unformed context, you get to tell them elaborate social lies in a formal one. After all, the game offers a stylized version of the same game most of the players have been engaged in at offices and in meetings all day long, and would normally be playing that night too, only less openly.

At the crux of the chapter, a suspicious Gopnik bursts in on his son and friend during a subsequent No Screen weekend to find them indeed at the computer. Don't worry, says the son—they're writing a screenplay. In fact it's a sequel to *Lord of the Rings* set in Manhattan. Okay, *this* kind of screen time is fine, admits Gopnik, who then again struggles to understand his own hypocrisy. He concludes that it's not the screens (i.e. digital media) that he objects to *per se*, only the idea of a cultural diet that consists primarily in passive rather than active interaction. It's fine, he reasons awkwardly, for his son to be a producer but not a consumer; fine to make stuff for other people to consume but not consume himself.
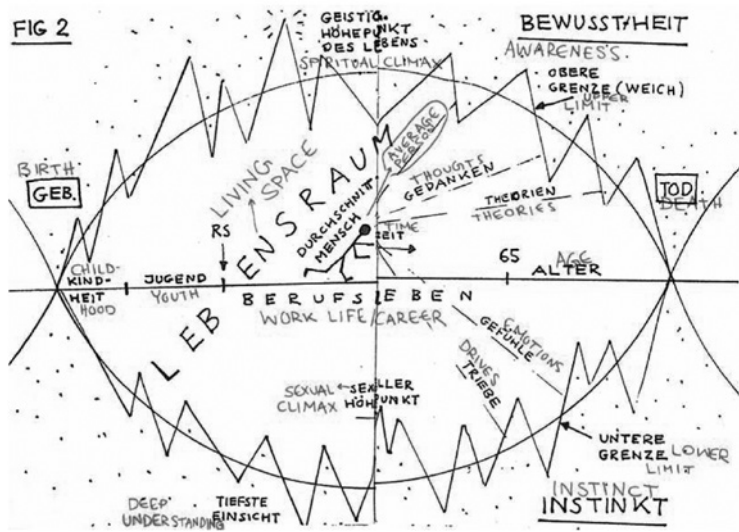
And before we finally dispersed for a weekend in the mountains, I played the group Mark Leckey's enigmatic video *GreenScreenRefrigerator* (2012), a piece that touches on all we'd been talking about this week—from open works through contemporary conditions to productive defamiliarization. The Lassoo, then, was all about the difficulty and necessity of watching, participating, and transforming *at the same time*.

We'd anticipated needing some kind of break in the middle of the course, so the fourth week was set up a little looser than the rest. Anthony Huberman showed up as a guest teacher with his designated tool the POINTER—the idea being that he'd focus on curating, i.e. pointing at other people's work.

We'd also already decided together to demonstrate the point by pointing particularly at the work of Swiss double act Fischli & Weiss. To be honest, this was mostly an excuse to show one of their two "Rat & Bear" films, *The Right Way* (1982–3), set in the Swiss mountains and so in accord with our own remote surroundings. We'd also managed to borrow and hang, in another corner of the gallery, their related series of 15 blithe diagrams drawn under the rubric "Order and Cleanliness." In light of our previous week's attempts to both diagram the contemporary condition and negotiate the vicissitudes of the Mafia Game, it was weirdly apt and instructive to have the series in the bakcground.

FIG 2

[Figure 2: hand-drawn diagram with labels: GEISTIG. HÖHEPUNKT DES LEBENS / SPIRITUAL CLIMAX; BEWUSST/HEIT AWARENESS; OBERE GRENZE (WEICH) LIMIT; BIRTH GEB.; LIVING SPACE / LEBENSRAUM; AVERAGE PERSON; THOUGHTS GEDANKEN; THEORIEN THEORIES; TOD DEATH; RS; DURCHSCHNITT MENSCH; TIME ZEIT; 65 AGE ALTER; CHILD-KIND-HEIT HOOD; JUGEND YOUTH; BERUFSLEBEN WORK LIFE/CAREER; EMOTIONS GEFÜHLE; DRIVES TRIEBE; SEXUAL-SEXLLER CLIMAX HÖHPUNKT; UNTERE GRENZE LOWER LIMIT; DEEP UNDERSTANDING TIEFSTE EINSICHT; INSTINCT INSTINKT]

Anthony began by discussing what he would probably resist calling "the ethics of curating"—to wit, the problems involved in exhibiting artworks in a manner more or less true to the spirit in which they were made. He pointed to his own recent attempts to do as much in *For The Blind Man In The Dark Room Looking For The Black Cat That Isn't There* (2009), a group show gathered around the idea of "nonknowledge," as well as at The Artists Institute, a space he's since set up in New York.

I also recall him berating The New Museum's recent show *The Last Newspaper* as a typical instance of the pitfalls of an overly didactic approach—a show in which each piece of work *in some way or other* happened to relate to newspapers. In Anthony's view, such a heavy-handed (and arbitrary-seeming) theme tends to overwhelm and obscure the niceties of the works it contains. Basically, he's against the sort of explication that tends to shut work down rather than open it up, as he's visualized in his own rudimentary bell-curve diagram:

[Figure: hand-drawn bell curve plotting "curiosity" (Y-axis) against "information" (X-axis), flanked by "ignorance" on the left and "understanding" on the right]

On a graph that plots information (X) against human curiosity (Y), the vector begins at zero information and zero curiosity, rises to a midpoint of adequate information, maximum curiosity and total engagement, then falls as too much information yields diminishing interest. And so the question he asks, in view of making and showing art, is: How to surf the top of the curve by offering just the right amount of information to maintain momentum but not so much as to kill it? How to maximize potential energy? If this is still too abstract, consider the same sentiment as a sentence assembled by David:

> The ongoing process of attempting to understand (but never really understanding completely) is absolutely productive. The relentless attempt to understand is what moves a practice moving forward.

Next, we collectively read one of Ryan Gander's "Loose Associations" lectures as an example of an alternative means of advancing ideas—in this case by tenuous, eccentric and frequently deadpan connection. We passed the transcription from person to person, each reading a paragraph out loud, then counterposed it with a longer piece written to accompany an exhibition curated by Tacita Dean, "An Aside."

One point that sticks in my mind from the ensuing discussion is how all the talk of carefully selecting, ordering, juxtaposing and captioning a group of works seemed peculiarly oblivious to the fact that each individual artwork is (ideally at least) *already* a carefully-conceived balancing act of what and what not to present. Again, the implication is that overdetermined

mediation at the macro level of a show can overwhelm or obscure what's already vital and refined about those indivudal works that constitute it.

On Tuesday morning we watched *The Right Way* for a bit of existential slapstick, then to everyone's relief decided to supplant the day's seminar with a group hike down the local Voodoo Trail. Generally, we ought to have done a lot more walking and less talking—though naturally all the walking triggered a lot more talking, too.

Back in the gallery on Wednesday, from one of our twin lecterns, a precariously balanced laptop played video footage of Jan Verwoert delivering a recent talk in Berlin, while from the other we projected images of the work Jan referred to along the way. The result was a second-hand lecture with the benefit of being able to press pause whenever we felt like debating a point. Ostensibly an attempt to answer the question, *Why are conceptual artists painting again?*, Jan first discussed who or what has typically legitimized art in the past, then recounted a number of instances of defiant vulnerability in the face of official "lawmakers": Lee Lozano v. Art & Language, for example.

Angie argued that Jan wasn't really talking about "the law," inasmuch as the notion of "common law" is, theoretically at least, an articulation of consensus opinion at any given moment. In other words, "the law" is fundamentally fluid rather than fixed, and so contrary to the kind of blind authority Jan means to insinuate. Angie went on to wonder instead whether what he was describing was more correctly "violence." Jan wasn't there to answer back, of course, but having thought it through a bit more myself, I'd conclude that (a) yes, "authority" seems closer to what Jan's getting at than "law"; that (b) violence and vulnerability are two plausible ways of working in the face of that authority, and ultimately (c) what Jan's arguing for is actually a kind of vulnerable violence (or vice versa).

On Thursday, the last class before an official long weekend, we ended Anthony's week of pointing by reading and discussing a draft of an essay he was in the middle of writing. The piece was commissioned by—and to some extent about—the Paris art collective castillo/corrales. The draft eventually became "Raise Your Glass," published in the catalog for an exhibition of the group's work at Midway in Minneapolis. Later it was rewritten and republished under the name "How to Behave Better" in our own *Bulletins of The Serving Library 2* (an issue that ended up being comprised entirely of Banff matter).

In both versions of the piece, Anthony is primarily concerned with the *manner* in which artists—and by extension curators and institutions—have generally *acted* in the past, then how they do and could and should act today. He describes three paradigms of modern artists. The first is the *Age of the Boxer* (heroic, macho, violent: Picasso), the second is the *Age of the Chess Player* (smart, knowing, clandestine: Duchamp), and the third is the currently-becoming *Age of Rat & Bear*, in which artists supposedly wander off the chess board altogether, refusing all established channels, protocols and etiquette, and preferring to make up their own rules as they go along. The gameboard no longer conditions the work, although the work might reconstitute the gameboard. In any case, the summary conclusion is that it isn't (only) what you do it's (also) the way that you do it.

At this point, Angie inserted a quick impromptu talk on Ludwig Wittgenstein and ethics. I forgot to mention earlier that she'd already given a quick introduction to Wittgenstein during the Type week. David had asked her to speak to the class about "the limits of language" with particular reference to colour (relative to his consideration of form's relation with the wider world), and Angie had decided to recount Wittgenstein's thinking about and around the subject.

Her first talk addressed Wittgenstein's well-known drift from his early axiomatic "picture theory" of language developed and published in the early 1920s (language is a 1:1 reflection

of the world; the inability to articulate certain phenomena demonstrates the limits of language rather than the limits of the world), to his later, looser thinking about and around "language games" a few decades later (language can't be mapped as a set of bounded logical relations; it is wholly contextual and relative).

Angie walked us through these ideas while projecting a flat field of "green" behind her on the wall as she talked. The "green" is in quote marks because the colour on the wall was animated to morph constantly between different greens, intermittently pushing the boundaries of what most of us *probably* perceive more as blue or yellow. This is effectively a translation of Wittgenstein's philosophy—that your green doesn't necessarily mean my green, *ergo* "green" is not a fixed referent. It can't be contained in a watertight "picture theory" and is thus better conceived of as one "language game" among many—all of which effect each other.

The focus on ethics in Angie's second talk was precipitated by a bunch of notes and lectures about Wittgenstein's work she'd found by chance in the library at Banff. In his 1929 "Lecture on Ethics" he distinguishes logical propositions (facts) from ethical (or aesthetic) statements. Crudely put, a logical proposition is "objective," that is, verifiable and beyond dispute, regardless of any particular context. An aesthetic statement, on the other hand, is in the realm of "whereof we cannot speak," essentially nonsensical, and so necessarily "subjective"—an individual or consensus *opinion* in a particular time and place.

From this point of view, then, any assertion concerning art is inescapably relative. Otherwise put, it makes no sense whatsoever to speak of aesthetic matters as though they were absolute facts. But there's a nice postscript to this hardline: Wittgenstein adds that he has only the deepest respect for anyone who feels obliged to do so inasmuch as it is an ineffably human impulse—"and I would not for my life ridicule it."

To pause and explain again how this relates to a reconsideration of foundational skills in a contemporary art/design school, it seems to me that to acknowledge the relative, unspeakable nature of aesthetic discourse before going ahead and discoursing anyway is a profitably provocative thing to do.

Next up was Robert with the CROP tool. Somewhere along the way we'd decided that our roundabout reading of this function would mine Michel Foucault's notion of "heterotopia," a term he borrowed from biology and applied to space. Unlike a utopia, a heterotopia is an actual place, simultaneously public and private, and typically characterized by the paradox of being "open and closed at the same time." (I suppose our tenuous idea was that heterotopias are effectively "cropped off from" the rest of the world.)

The plan was to assemble a few pieces of work set on Foucault's prime example of a heterotopia, the cruise ship. We had in mind Jean-Luc Godard's latest offering, *Film Socialisme*, and David Foster Wallace's longform essay "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again." Both are at least partially set on a luxury cruise, which proves an ideal backdrop for a bit of pop anthropology. Robert also noted the various heterotopias nested in our own current location: Canada > Banff > campus > Visual Arts dept. > gallery > toolbox. This helped sharpen the idea: the crop tool became a symbol of close reading, and Robert proposed as primary resource Don DeLillo's classic 1985 campus novel *White Noise*. His idea was to force us all to read the entire novel in a day, then subject us to a run of close reading and analysis for the rest of the week.

In the event we didn't read DeLillo; at this point in the course it simply seemed too much to ask of our flagging student body. Robert did, however, manage to coax it into reading the

126-page Wallace essay on Monday in order to collectively dissect it on Tuesday. He offered a set of principles for close reading (different approaches to first, second and third readings; granting the writer the benefit of the doubt; reading with humility, etc.), tried them out on a little bit of Nabokov (the wonderful introduction to his *Lectures on Literature*), then spent the rest of the class discussing the structure of "A Supposedly Fun Thing …". We searched for the essay's key moments or flashpoints, sequences that in some way seemed to sum up the whole, and ended by listing all previously unknown or obscure words and phrases. This list proved useful later in the week.

This was quite a heavy session, but Wednesday was much lighter. It involved a very different kind of close reading—one effected by our own writing. Robert had asked me to introduce Raymond Queneau's seminal *Exercises in Style*. After a quick history of the author and the book, I showed some examples from a related exercise I'd previously given to a class of art students in LA. Mimicking Queneau's *Exercises*, they were asked to rewrite a brief, mundane event from their past week in a number of different styles. These "styles" were, in turn, drawn from a lexicon of most frequently used "art words" the class had been compiling that semester. Here are three of my favourites from one student's trip to the dentist:

> MARXIST: I went to the dentist for a teeth cleaning on Friday. Dr Nyong, although an immigrant, had taken American capitalism to heart, by charging a struggling artist $60 for a few minutes of his time. Obviously the lack of social and medical program meant the money would come from my own pocket money that had already been taxed ad nauseum, to fund wars against the economically downtrodden peoples of foreign countries, and to line the coffers of the soulless elite. I was given a "red" toothbrush as a parting gift. Ironic.

> HEROIC: Marching purposefully into the enemy's compound, your narrator forced the foreigner to accept his terms to beautify what God had so generously given him. Keeping a scarlet anti-cavity weapon as a trophy, said narrator marched out into the world.

> ENCOUNTER: My God, it's a dentist. Right on top of a liquor store, of all places. Hello, is that a receptionist I see? The dentist is touching me, all over my mouth, in a painful yet professional way. We finalize our dance by exchanging gifts to commemorate our time together. I give she $60. She giveth me a toothbrush. The colour of a valentine.

This was basically the template for the rest of the day's class, only we had the Banff class rewrite the first couple of nicely mundane opening lines from Wallace's essay according to a "style" suggested by entries from yesterday's list of dubious terms. The only ones I immediately recall are "Phallic," "Calvinist," and "Old Dimes," which should give you an idea of the crazy range. We had an hour or so to perform our operation on the text, and another hour to read the results, which were predictably deranged.

On the fourth day we collectively close-read Susan Sontag's canonical 1965 essay "On Style" along with a set of antagonistic questions from Angie. Sontag's basic argument is that style *is* content, or at least ought to be considered as such by critics. Curiously, though, "On Style" is (on close reading) itself fragmentary, elliptical, and frequently obfuscating—hence Angie's idea was to read Sontag in view of her own argument. In other words, how to account for the content manifest in "On Style"'s style? It was a particularly muscular morning, with a lot of wrangling about reading it out of its mid-sixties context and so forth. To wind down, Robert offered his own close (*very* close) reading of the end of Wallace's cruise report—an interpretation of its grammatical constructs, repetitions, and varying use of the first, second, and third person. He concluded with a metaphysical reading of the last paragraph.

And on the Friday he and Angie presented a number of works

by artist Moyra Davey in pointed anticipation of the upcoming, final week. As I mentioned before, this week would entirely comprise individual presentations by all the participants. But the plan also involved our collectively assembling a set of rules to underpin the *critique* of these presentations—ideally in a form that would in some way assimilate the reflexive design of the Mafia Game (and whatever else seemed relevant from the Type, Lassoo, Pointer, and Crop weeks).

The idea was to take Davey as a test case, a means of easing ourselves into (finally!) talking directly about contemporary art. As luck would have it, the Banff Centre happened to have a few pieces of her work in their archive that we were able to have brought up to the gallery: a series of extremely close-up photos of U.S. pennies so worn that Lincoln's profile is almost totally obliterated by filth and scratches. Next we watched Davey's *50 Minutes*, a kind of video diary about her family, time, literature, 9/11, psychoanalysis and domesticity that makes repeated reference to her refrigerator—which then sat in peculiar juxtaposition with Leckey's *GreenScreenRefrigerator*. Finally, we read extracts from two pieces of her writing, "The Problem of Reading" and "The Wet and the Dry." I half-recall some some richly allegorical goings-on between Goethe, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Percy & Mary Shelley.

After absorbing these works, each in a different medium, we discussed their various effects in terms of what was common to all three and unique to each one. And to close we made one further close reading and group analysis of a very terse, sad piece called "Grammar Problems," in which Lydia Davis writes of her father's death in terms of the ambiguity of past and present tenses. Here we conspicuously applied all the approaches to reading we'd been practising all week, and we already seems more athletic and capable. I can clearly recall the surprising sense of being able to simultaneously consider the text in terms of "direct" (objective?) meaning and "indirect" (subjective?) affect—as well as the interrelation between the two.

Later I had the impression that "close reading" was the sort of skill that, before Banff, most of us assumed to practice by default—and so approached this particular week with more skepticism than usual. It became increasingly clear to me that this wasn't necessarily true at all. Robert's exercises were pointed and relentless enough to make the act of close reading strange again, showing us that this particular skill had either been neglected, forgotten, or never actually learned in the first place. Something you thought you knew how to do. As time went on, I felt more and more that our Foundation Course—in this iteration, at least—was really more of a Refresher Course.

And so to the final week. Angie had announced the plan well in advance, so the group had been (or should have been) considering how to present their work to an audience as we went along. They were free to show stuff they'd made in Banff or beforehand, or equally to present some sort of investigation that extended from the seminars, though it had become clear that the mornings were generally too draining to move on to much in the way of practical work in the afternoons.

In keeping with the previous weeks, we stressed that *how* these presentations were presented was at least as important as *what*—or rather, in line with the anti-binary thinking of Latour, Eco, Sontag and all the rest, there ought to be no distinction between the two. Angie offered the group a further hook onto which to hang their work: that everyone ought to ask themsevles a question and attempt to answer it in the presentation—though that question needn't be apparent to anyone else.

The focus on individual presentations was born of a certain frustration with the typically wishy-washy rhetoric of contemporary artist's talks ("What I find interesting is ... and then I came across ... which made me think that ..."). The idea was to push on to something less insipid and solipsistic, more inspired and substantial. Though admittedly not exactly a toolbox tool, in an introductory talk Angie posited the pinwheel and its digital antecedents (watch, clock, hourglass) as emblematic of putting one's practice on hold, pausing in order to (re)consider and (re)articulate it. Thinking about thinking—in this case for the benefit of others as well as oneself.

And on the receiving end, as stated, the aim was to channel all our talk of the past five weeks towards assembling a set of rules for the group critique—rules that would foster contemplation of, say, how art/design might be deemed timely and pertinent beyond the more simplistic senses of "new" or "different"; how to talk about art/design in a manner or spirit equivalent to it; the extent to which art/design might be considered productively vulnerable or macho, or open or closed, or self-aware or deluded.

I should note that there was a fair bit of grumbling about the plan to leave these presentations until the end, but I still say that upending this particular expectation was worth the payoff—not for the sake of being contrary, but because it meant the talks were less concerned with things already made and more with *ideas before being transformed into things*. It shifted attention from products to processes, which after all seems more proper to what is, after all, a course not a show.

The format we initially settled on was to carve the remaining hours into blocks of 10-minute presentations and 15-minute reactions. The presentations could take any form whatsoever, and experiment was strongly encouraged. Afterwards, the rest of us would pick a card from a hat that allocated us into one of 3 groups, each of which then spent 5 of the 15 minutes responding in line with a specific command. These were initially something along the lines of: 1. summarize the talk for your best friend's mother; 2. loose-associate from the ostensible subject matter of the take; 3. describe the various effects and affects of the talk as a whole. By Thursday they'd been whittled down to: 1. *describe* (what happened; the affects); 2. *analyze* (the structure; how it yielded those affects); 3. *associate* (with other things we've talked about, ideally from other fields). Once we got used to reacting, the scaffolding seemed more and more superfluous, so we duly dropped the hat, cards, groups and categories.

These three mornings were fairly inimical and required deep concentration. While we didn't exactly force anyone to respond, there was of course an unspoken pressure to do so—and so too the regular bad vibes of any mandatory audience participation. In the end everyone complied, though, and the presentations seemed to improve as we went along. Improve how? In that they seemed increasingly useful. Useful how? In the sense that they generated more evocative, provocative and even profound comments. On the downside, we seemed to laugh less and less. Then something particularly telling happened.

On Wednesday and Thursday, Robert somewhat conspicuously stopped participating—didn't draw a card from the hat, didn't comment, just sat silently watching the rest of us. Then, just before we all broke up for good, someone asked him why he'd withdrawn so suddenly.

Robert replied that he'd simply been curious to perceive how the critique was functioning as a system, but had found that impossible while participating because absorbing and responding to the particular presentation in the moment required his *undivided attention*.

In response to which Sharon Kahanoff (an invaluable member of the group, and not insignificantly a teaching artist herself) pointed out that Robert's "problem" embodied all we'd been trying to grasp and resolve for the past six weeks, namely: *how to participate while* remaining *fully conscious of the terms of participation*?

The trick, she went on, was to stop conceiving of this parallax view (unification, duckrabbit) as being the goal of education, and rather *realize it as the necessary precursor to vital work*. In other words, the "solution" to Robert's "problem" is to avoid thinking dichotomously in the first place.

———————

There was a certain paragraph in your last letter that I (happily) had to read a few times to fully assimilate. In it you describe "dialectics" as a fundamentally *passive* method—a tool for thinking rather than acting. Naturally there's no reason such thinking couldn't be *in advance of* acting, but anyway it just occurred to me that your observation chimes with the question of perspective we found ourselves repeatedly grappling with in Banff, nicely summarized by Robert's quandry above, i.e. how to be simultaneously involved *and* aware, inside *and* outside. Otherwise put (perhaps): *how to inhabit an *active* dialectics?*

One last anecdote—something the same Sharon told me during Lassoo week. It came up while we were trying to articulate the difference between what I might tentatively call "true" and "false" self-reflexivity. "True" being what I've previously suggested to you is something like the by-product of an ethos; "false" being more akin to a contrived add-on, an effect.

The story concerned one of Sharon's students who was in the process of making a film that she (Sharon, not the student) described as being "like a really bad version of *The Blair Witch Project*"—shorthand for an emphatically anxious film. Part of the plan involved filming with an infrared camera along a particular stretch of road at night in an attempt to both capture and induce a sensation of apprehension or fear. You can imagine the sort of thing easily enough, right?—and that's precisely the point: the idea was so premeditated that it precluded any *unscripted actual* movement—and perhaps a little surplus sublime—from entering the work.

So the student was busy filming along this route according to her conception of how it ought to appear when she suddenly realizes she'll have to pass through a very dark tunnel under a broad bridge that she'd either overlooked or forgotten about. According to Sharon, the moment the student enters this tunnel, the camera subtly but palpably registers her *actual* fear as she reacts and recoils. In this half-minute or so something genuine is recorded—an effect that yields an *affect* (a feeling, an emotion) patently lacking in the footage immediately before and after. This is what Eco's getting at when he describes "form as a way of thinking"—as a means of proceeding.

In confirmation of all this, Sharon pointed me at a chapter called "The Vestige of Art" in Jean-Luc Nancy's book of aesthetic philosophy *The Muses*. Nancy's notion of the "vestige" describes that moment in the tunnel as something approaching "the trace of a cause" rather than an image of the cause itself, which isn't quite the same thing as an image of the cause's effect. He elaborates using two fantastically simple examples— the smoke of a cigarette and the footprint of a shoe. Both are clear traces of the *causes* of specific actions, or *actions made latent*, able to be perceived, or re-conceived, but only by indirect means. And because an essential quality of the trace is that it's a step removed, fleeting, always in the process of evaporating or dissipating or fading, it can never be wholly grasped (fixed, domesticated, reified, neutered). Essentially and elliptically, I think he's saying that this "vestige" of art *is* art.

In the hope of compounding Nancy's sense, here's something I'd originally intended to kick off this whole letter, but forgot about it until now. The other week I came across an early book of Latour's—really half a book, given that it's tacked onto the end of his first major publication, *The Pasteurization of France*. The work is called *Irreductions*, which actually happens to be something of a metaphysical manifesto. ("Manifesto" seems a bit strong for Latour's chatty way of writing, but still.) It's written as a series of branching, decimalized axioms, not at all unlike (and possibly in homage to) Wittgenstein's

Tractatus. However, these axioms are occasionally interrupted by interludes with titles like "A pseudo-autobiographical account of a revelation in the French countryside" I may be remembering that wrong, but certainly not this first "axiom" as I wrote down immediately, along with its footnote:

> 1. Nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else.*
>
> * I will call this the "principle of irreducibility', but it is a prince that does not govern since that would be a contradiction.

The axiom is entirely in line with Latour's later philosophy— against the reduction of actual complexities to fictional models. But it's the footnote I really like. *A prince-iple that doesn't govern!* An ethos that resists hardening into ideology! This seems to me a convincing way of *thinking* the balance we've been discussing (you and me and all of us at Banff)—and by "thinking" here I mean something like "accounting for theoretically, as a precursor or supplement to practice". Pithy, I know, but perhaps *practically* so: an acknowledgement that's necessarily fleeting – a vestige of insight! – then gets right down to work.

This brings us up to date. Like I said, I think that this pilot version of our so-called Foundation Course was actually more of a *Refresher* Course, in the sense that it was largely concerned with *upsetting customary modes of thought*. I have to admit I find it hard to imagine what we did there being applied to a younger set of people at what we'd usually consider to be "foundational" age, if only because any sense of its success seemed so dependent on the engagement and sophistication of an older, more mature group who arrived with preconceptions anf fully-formed opinions we could all usefully work against. A measure of the success of these six weeks is that it did often feel genuinely "upsetting"—that is, awkward and uncomfortable.

I'm sure that all we learned there *can* be adapted to apply to a younger set of blanker slates; I just can't immediately imagine how. I think it's because I have a hard time accepting the idea that I'm supposed to convince anyone to be interested in all this—culture—in the first place ... which is what a large part of teaching undergraduates feels like to me these days.

Perhaps this is a good point on which to end—or begin again: any art worth looking at generates its own conviction, and likewise any individual or group worth pursuing their own arts generate their own convictions too.

Discuss?

S

Bibliography

In the hope of helping the text flow a bit better I decided not to foot- or endnote the many books and articles cited in the texts, but all the relevant references are finally collected here.

Towards a Critical Faculty

To make this "reader" a little easier to read I took the dubious liberty of slightly amending many of its embedded texts. Please note, though, that I avoided marking omissions with a "[…]" so as not to end up with a completely dotty text. Naturally I was careful avoid any loss or distortion of meaning, but still strongly refer the reader back to the primary sources.

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From the Toolbox of a Serving Library

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See also the entire issue of *Bulletins of The Serving Library* 2 (2011) which grew directly out of the Banff residency.

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