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In Response

Laura Knight and Adam Ramejkis

It's often difficult to pinpoint exactly when something starts, or at what point an idea has enough form to be recognised as a project. *In Response* is such a project.

The 'In Response' exhibition, which features 22 visual essays from students on the Graduate Diploma Graphic Design course at Chelsea College of Arts, opened on 30th January in Conway Hall Library and will be on display until 31st March 2020. Each essay is a personal critical response to the issues and ideas of different Victorian pamphlets held in Conway Hall's library collection. Individually, the essays cover issues such as feminism, racism, disability, futurism, vegetarianism and speculation, each representing a visual conversation between the present and the past. As a collection, they represent collaboration *in response* to many different challenges and opportunities.

We had collaborated on the Graduate Diploma in the previous academic year. The course is fairly unique in the way that it brings students from multiple disciplinary and cultural backgrounds together to study Graphic Design, often for the first time. It's an interesting opportunity to push at the edges of what Graphic Design is and could be, and to embrace the value of different perspectives.

Graphic Design is often defined and understood as working *in response* to commercial needs. What graphic designers do is invariably understood by what they produce and these objects and artefacts are often created *in response* to the needs of clients. This is an understanding we constantly seek to challenge in our students, particularly at postgraduate level - to engage with ideas and thinking beyond the abstract references of the traditional art and design canon and beyond the category of 'commercial'.

Adam had worked with the Graduate Diploma course previously in his role as an Intercultural Communication Trainer. Many of these sessions had provided specific time and space to consider the value of difference in cultural perspectives and different approaches to critical thinking. It is an unfortunate reality that UK Higher Education is often uncritical in the way it defines such

ideas. Students can find themselves stranded in the gap between their own cultural understandings and the institution's opaque definitions. The way that critical thinking is addressed can often make students feel that some ways of thinking and knowing are more valid than others. Students from the last academic year had been vocal about how much they valued the space the course made to explore these ideas and how it had helped them to find their own voice. *In response* to changes in the design of the course, we recognised the opportunity for these approaches and ideas to become more embedded. This is where the idea for a co-designed and co-delivered project came into being.

After further discussion, we realised that this project would enable us to work more closely with Siobhan Britton, Graphic Design Subject Librarian at Chelsea. Siobhan collaborated with us on a number of the workshops and in weekly tutorials on the project, bringing her knowledge of libraries and collections but also her experience as a zine-maker and illustrator. Her contribution and expertise was invaluable to the process.

The project also built on an existing collaboration between Adam and Conway Hall, which started back in 2016. After discovering the library and engaging in discussions with Sophie Hawkey Edwards (Library and Learning Manager at the time), I recognised the potential of exploring the curatedness of libraries and archives to question systems of knowledge. *In response*, he developed facilitated discussions and series of workshops and events around thinking and language, in relation to the multitude of ideas and ideals represented in the library collection and championed by Conway Hall Ethical Society.

At the end of 2017, Conway Hall received support from the Heritage Lottery Fund to run Victorian Blogging - a project that aimed to explore the parallels between the format and purpose of 19th Century pamphlets and 21st Century blogs (and zines). In order to make the collection more accessible, Conway Hall began to digitise their archive of 19th Century pamphlets. Adam was invited to assist Sophie and Alicia Chilcott (then Digitisation Coordinator) in designing and delivering learning activities, and in cataloguing the digitised pamphlets.



These insubstantial, fragile pamphlets represent an aesthetic treasure trove of Victorian ephemera for typographically-minded Graphic Design students. However, and perhaps more substantially, they also provide a record of the enlightened individuals, organisations and movements of nineteenth century Britain, the political and social causes they championed and the ideals they held. In digitising this content, Conway Hall provided a new and very accessible way for our students to engage with and respond to it.

Through a series of workshops, we invited the students to draw out some of these historical narratives and consider their relevance, at this moment in time, to them personally. The workshops took place at Conway Hall. In this way, the students' work was *in response* not just to the collection but to the realities of the library space. Our first workshop, Creative Library Research, explored the idea of serendipity in the context of the Conway Hall collection. Many of our students later confessed that they didn't use libraries but preferred to look for content online. They also commented that it had never occurred to them that they would find anything of value to them as designers outside of an art and design library. One student later reflected on the value of "accepting unusual knowledge as a designer", highlighting what a different experience it was to find themselves in this space.

We also asked them to explore the library and try to decipher what the library was and what its motivations might be. We invited them to consider libraries as curated spaces, representing particular types of knowledge and bias. We challenged them to consider what the value of collections like these might be to a graphic designer. One student wrote the following in response to the workshop:

"There is a well-established canon in Graphic Design, meaning that practitioners have been relying on the same literature, same biases, and the same people in the past. The consequence of such behaviour is that graphic design risks becoming repetitive and that it keeps reflecting ideas and styles that are no longer relevant nor accurate. Hence expanding our research resources from Graphic Design books to humanistic literature, which critically reflects societal processes and issues, can only add value to our work."

We followed up this workshop with a zine-ing workshop. Each student chose a synopsis of a Victorian pamphlet and produced a zine in response. The approach in this workshop was familiar to our students as throughout the course we constantly encourage them to respond visually - to make their thoughts visible. We adopt this approach in



Photo: Cheng Meng

response to the shadow of the 'big idea' in Graphic Design education. There's still a sense among the students that an idea is something that you must wait for, that design cannot happen before the idea. In asking them to respond visually, instinctually, we promote the idea that making is a form of thinking, and that some ideas only reveal themselves through the process of creating.

The constraints of the workshop produced some interesting results that allowed students to consider their own initial responses to the issues and ideas of the pamphlets. Students had the following comments *in response* to the workshop:

"It is a completely different approach to creating something. It is almost like the brain goes into 'survival mode', and it is in that mode when we start using and discovering skills and ideas that we did not know we had."

"This is definitely a skill that I want to adopt in future projects as I think it is a very efficient and successful way of expressing ideas and visualising initial thoughts."

Over the following weeks, each of the students developed their ideas into a visual essay. This was an interesting format for them to work with. Visual essays differ from conventional essays in that they use sequences of images to communicate a critical position rather than words. Students were asked to produce a publication *in response* to their pamphlet using 10-12 images and up to 500 words. The results were beautiful and surprising. The essays were as varied as the students in terms of format, approach and ideas, even in response to the same pamphlet. Responses to *The Man From the Moon*, for example, ranged from a paper wallet of 'moon money' to a risograph-printed visual poem.

For the exhibition, the essays were classified using the Dewey system and placed back into the Conway Hall collection in their relevant sections. Yellow shelf cards were the only clue as to their location. This contextualisation was a specific choice *in response* to the all-too-often de-contextualisation of objects in Graphic Design exhibitions. Graphic Design is never without context. This approach at first confused visitors to the

Give Peace a Chance: Conway Hall and the Peace Movement

Olwen Terris



Photos: Anita Strasser

exhibition. After wandering around for 10 minutes one visitor then shyly asked where the work was, and was subsequently delighted when they realised that they needed to look through the shelves and the other books in the collection to find the work. Essays were viewed in the context of other books dealing with the same topic, allowing visitors to experience the often curious range of titles and subjects that the Conway Hall Library collection deals with.

On the opening night, people were free to peruse and spend time with the collection. People would often cluster in sections where multiple students had responded to the same pamphlet. For example, five students had produced essays *in response* to *The Fruits of Philosophy* by Charles Knowton.

For many students, the opening night was the end of the process - an opportunity to come together and celebrate the achievements of the term. However, there

are some interesting ways that the theme of In Response continues. Students from the BA Graphic Design at Camberwell spent some time in the library producing zines *in response* to the essays. A group of Graphic Media Design students from LCC dropped by to view the essays in preparation for their own visual essays. Members of the public have contacted us to ask if the essays will be available digitally; they want to share them with people who are not able to visit the exhibition before it closes in March. Educators have asked if we will run similar projects and workshops for them. Students have asked when we will be working with Conway Hall next...

These are all questions that we must consider our responses to. As we've said, it's often difficult to pinpoint exactly when something starts. Perhaps the challenge we didn't anticipate with this project has been deciding if, when and how it ends.

Laura Knight is a graphic designer and course leader for the Graduate Diploma Graphic Design at Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London.

Adam Ramejkis works at University of the Arts London, running workshops, seminars and projects for staff and students on criticality, creativity, communication and collaboration. He has also run workshops and events in Conway Hall Library exploring the links between thinking and language.



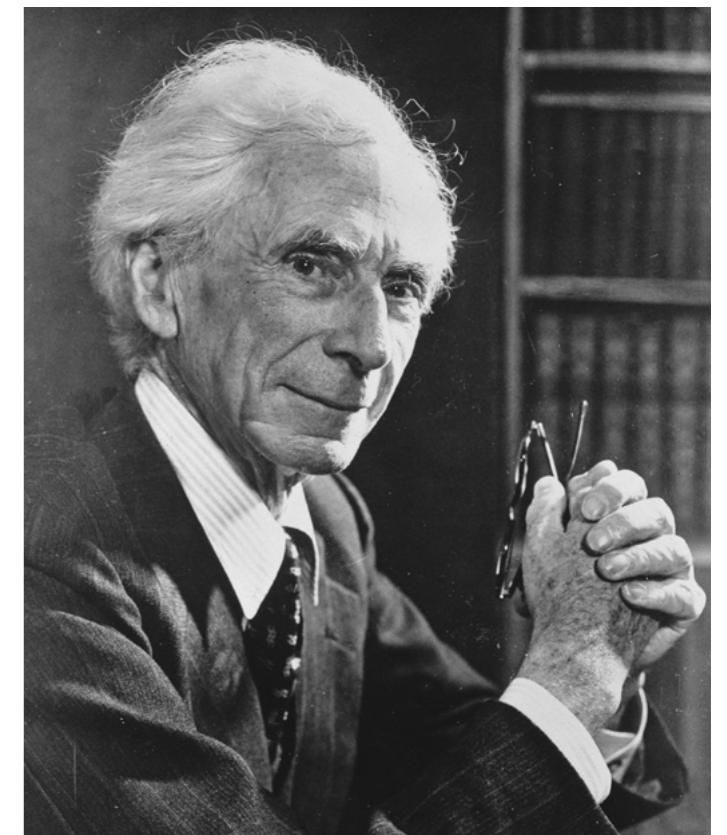
From Moncure Conway to Yoko Ono Conway Hall has always been a place where peace activists gather to campaign, agitate and perform, in the expectation that their audience, if not in complete agreement with their views and strategies, will be engaged, committed and tolerant.

Two Nobel Peace Prize winners and one three-times nominee have spoken here. Journalist, author and Labour MP Norman Angell delivered the 4th Conway Memorial at South Place Institute on March 1913; his text was 'War and the Essential Realities'. Angell's seminal work *The Grand Illusion* (1910) - the inspiration for Jean Renoir's 1937 film - analysed the nature of war, concluding that the danger of mutual destruction of both aggressors and defenders had made armed conflict unprofitable. Angell was awarded the Peace Prize in 1933 in recognition of the impact of *The Grand Illusion* and his work for the League of Nations.

Mairead Corrigan co-founded the Northern Ireland Peace Movement (later renamed Community of Peace People). In 1976 she was the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize (shared with Betty Williams) for working to a resolution of The Troubles in Northern Ireland. The following year she gave a Sunday Lecture with the title 'Making Peace'.

Dr Scilla Elworthy is a peace campaigner and founder of the Oxford Research Group, a non-governmental organisation set up in 1982 to develop effective dialogue between nuclear weapons policy-makers and their critics, work for which she was nominated three times for the Peace Prize. In 2017 she lectured at Conway Hall on 'The Business Plan for Peace: Making Possible a World Without War'.

Bertrand Russell and Fenner Brockway are perhaps the best known peace campaigners to have had strong associations with Conway Hall; both were conscientious



Give Peace a Chance - Bertrand_Russell_1957 - Wiki Commons.jpg

objectors, both were imprisoned for their beliefs. Russell spoke to the Conway Discussion Circle on 'The Pacifist Campaign' on November 23 1937, arguing that 'in the circumstances of modern war you are never likely to secure any end we think desirable by means of a large war'. Lord Brockway spoke at Conway Hall many times including addresses on humanism, the Levellers and Diggers and his 75 years in politics. An extract from his autobiography *98 Not Out* beautifully illustrates his moral strength and compassion: "I have an extraordinary sense of freedom in owning nothing. I give all I receive above