

Article

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Method illustration

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This article outlines a form of practice formed on BA Illustration at Camberwell College of Arts, called method illustration. It alludes to an embodiment of experience and understanding before or during the production of illustration in relation to a topic or theme, challenging the expectation of illustration always ending on an image. It plays on the term method acting, which is built on techniques from the Stanislavski System and contemporized. The article includes examples of students work and how this practice can be applied.

Figure 1: Method illustration, 2021. Photograph. © Jen Franklin.

Jen Franklin (JF) and **Rachel Emily Taylor (RET)** *Method illustration* is an emerging research method on the BA Illustration course at Camberwell College of Arts that requires a student to embody, become, make or engage experientially with the topic they are researching. For example, a student carrying out a project about cheese, learns to make cheese; a student exploring space does some astronaut training or a student who needs to draw someone rolling down a hill, rolls down a hill. Students carry out the tasks with risk assessments and then report back with a record of the *method illustration*. This may manifest in various forms such as drawings, photographs, film, writing or objects, that later may evolve into outcomes or exist solely to augment a project through achieving a deeper understanding of the topic.

Method illustration plays on the term ‘method acting’, which was developed and established by Lee Strasberg (1988). Well-known examples of ‘method acting’ in film are

Forest Whitaker learning to speak Swahili and to play the accordion for *The Last King of Scotland* (2006); Robert de Niro driving taxi cabs for his role in *Taxi Driver* (1976) and Tipi Hedron having birds thrown in her face during the filming of *The Birds* (1963).

Performativity is commonly used within Illustration practice, such as in storytelling, ‘mise-en-scène’, character development and life drawing. However, *method illustration* relates more directly to embodiments of experience, making and doing and of understanding before, during or sometimes after illustration research.

In 2018, when we met at Camberwell, we found that we shared a principle.

RET: Before joining the team, I was intrigued by the potential synthesis between performance and illustration, supported by my background and experience in theatre. I had explored these ideas during a residency at the Foundling Museum (2016–17), where I aimed to generate material with workshop participants to explore how we might be able to engage with narratives of the past.

The practice of *method illustration* arose through workshops on BA Illustration at Camberwell (which Jen outlines below). The process resonates with theatre practitioner Constantin Stanislavski’s System and his rehearsal techniques, such as ‘Given Circumstances’ and ‘Magic If’ ([1936] 2008), as these practices formed the basis of Strasberg’s ‘method acting’. I employed Stanislavski’s strategies as warm-up exercises during the workshops at the Foundling Museum to encourage participants to explore the history of the museum and the lives of foundlings through *action*.

The outcomes from the workshops became *fuel* for my illustration practice and I integrated them within it as if found artefacts in the attempt to construct authentic *heat*. An example of this being the children’s paintings included within the work *Kept Within the Bounds*, an installation that I exhibited in the Painting Gallery at the Foundling Museum in 2016. The rehearsal techniques enabled me to explore Tom Selwyn’s notion of ‘hot

authenticity' (1996: 20) when representing the historical foundling child. Selwyn pulled apart two different strands in authenticity, and 'hot' and 'cool', in this instance I explored the intangible, emotional responses that an audience might feel when responding to a performer or object.

Both my practice and the teaching at Camberwell brings up the question of the boundaries of self and other. During the workshops at the Foundling Museum, I questioned if the past was a plastic medium with which we worked, and where there is a fusion between the individual and the imagined past. The task is comparable to an actor rehearsing to perform a role onstage. Stanislavski's *Emotion Memory* encouraged an actor to apply his/her own memories to their character's experiences. But when practising illustration and telling another's story, we must not lose sight of the fact that even if we 'stand in another's shoes' (Klein [1959] 1988: 252) we do not stand in their skin.

At Camberwell, we aim to further develop *method illustration* as a pedagogic tool. This article outlines the practice in its current form as we work alongside each other to develop it.

JF: The idea of *Method Illustration* at Camberwell began with a brief I set for Foundation students around ten years ago that I now fondly refer to as 'make cheese'. We had annually run an information graphics project called 'How Things Work'. I had been discussing Michael Beirut's (2007: 13) essay 'Warning may contain non design content' to acknowledge that illustration and graphic design are nearly always about *something else*. The project fell before the winter break and that year instead of the usual order of asking students to research a topic and then create graphics to show how the topic worked, I asked students to put their expectations of the discipline, and their pencil cases, aside and to simply go and make one of the following: *laughter, chaos, movement, wind, peace, noise, cheese, harmony,*

discord, shelter, life, change, space, motion, inertia, backlash, thought, hope, confusion, uncertainty, spark, energy, happiness, reflection, clarity, colour, light.

Once they had made it, they were required to come back to the studio and *explain* how they did it or in other words show ‘how it worked’. The reporting back could have been regarded as an initial or raw stage of an information graphics project, but that was left for a later discussion. For now, all they needed to do was create or engage with the given topic in their own way. I photocopied the Michael Beirut essay, tied the copies with a silver ribbon and gave one to each student as a festive gift.

The students responded enthusiastically to the task. The *explanations* were compelling and the approaches diverse. An interesting feature was that the authority on the topics seemed to be positioned more notably outside of college. The students were active rather than assuming passive roles. Amongst the examples, one student had made cheese and another a shelter for a monkey in Brazil.

I later integrated the approach into my regular teaching practice, encouraging students to make, do and embody topics. I found it to be particularly effective in addressing the hiatus of making final-year students on the BA Illustration course often faced following their dissertation, to get them making again. I formalized the task and called it ‘Method Illustration’ (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Method illustration brief, 2021. Image. © Jen Franklin.

In ‘method acting’, the actor is expected to sublimate and manifest their experience in a performance. A question over the validity of *method illustration* as a research method is concerned with how the knowledge might be assimilated into ‘an illustration’. Thinking traditionally, one might expect an image. On the course we are currently exploring methods of practical making as knowledge production, born out of a necessity to challenge or expand conventional methods of academic knowledge production, such as the long form essay,

which have been shown to disadvantage some students. Art and design students naturally build knowledge and think through making. However, acts of dismantling established systems can be messy and *method illustration* places both students and staff in positions of uncertainty where outcomes are unpredictable.

Figure 3: Naomi Anderson-Subryan teaches tap dancing at Skillz Week, 2018. Photograph. © Jen Franklin.

At Camberwell we are comfortable working contrary to the expectation that illustration will end on an image (Figure 3). An image may lie somewhere on a continuum. A student may begin with an image, end with one or not make an image at all. It is not uncommon for third-year students to no longer identify as visual image makers – but to align their practice with authorship, activism, education or entertainment and anchor it with these key recognizable illustration terms. Students choosing more established routes may still make images. In all cases *method illustration* is a way to engage, to discover, to shake up and to understand more deeply. We view illustration as a verb as well as a noun. From the Latin *illustrare*, meaning to *illuminate* or *light up*, arguably the attempt to illuminate *is* to be engaged in the discipline of illustration. Illustration is a process.

The following images are selected examples of method illustration carried out by final-year students researching their personally chosen *Individual Programme of Study* topics.

In an exploration of the value of personal objects and kitsch, Tallulah Harris (2018) engaged in various types of gambling to raise money for what she referred to as ‘an object of value’. When the winnings were deemed not enough, she spent the money on – again in Tallulah’s words – a ‘bougie day out’ to experience the value of the winnings. Tallulah’s final piece was a meticulously designed, beaded scratch card of approximately 3500 beads (Figure 4). Tallulah felt whilst making it, a sensation of losing control due to the intricate

beading process and a sense of irony in the labour exerted to make something that was essentially useless (Harris 2018).

Figure 4: Tallulah Harris, Beaded scratch card, 2018. Photograph. © Tallulah Harris.

Kathryn Brammall while making a comic about a bull rider (Figure 7) travelled to a homestead and worked as a cattle rancher (Figure 5). Kathryn who now refers to herself as a ‘rock climbing cowboy’ and ‘method illustrator’ said that the experience influenced her in multiple ways.

With my cowboy work, it informed the comic that was somewhat in development already, but it also just completely inspired me in terms of homesteading and living off grid, which is now something I regularly make work about (and hope to live like one day), so there were a lot of unexpected lessons that I learnt.

(Brammall 2020)

In a project called ‘Love letters to the mountains’ (Figure 8) Kathryn went on to form a relationship with the mountains, where image making and mountains formed a reciprocal relationship, the image became part of the journey and vice versa.

Figure 5: Kathryn Brammall at a Colorado ranch, 2018. Photograph. © Kathryn Brammall.

Figure 6: Kathryn Brammall, Sketchbook page with Longhorn, 2018. Pencil on paper. © Kathryn Brammall.

Figure 7: Kathryn Brammall, Cowboys, 2018. Pencil on paper. © Kathryn Brammall.

Figure 8: Kathryn Brammall, Love letters to the mountains, 2020. Photograph. © Kathryn Brammall.

Nayara Assan Ettienne made scarves that she describes as objects of female empowerment, natural hair appreciation and protective styling, to shed light on contemporary race issues (Figure 9). A deepened understanding of hair protection arose through the making of three wigs: two from synthetic and one from human hair employing methods of sewing,

crochet, dying and bleaching – before the knowledge was applied to the production of the printed silk scarves (Assan Ettienne 2020).

Figure 9: Nayara Assan Ettienne, Silk scarf, 2020. Photograph. © Nayara Assan Ettienne.

Rory Wynn combined his interest in representing society in the broadest sense through his illustrations, with a fascination with what he described as ‘road stick people’. His children’s book depicted a town filled with diverse characters (Figure 11). Prior to the final book, securing a machine to make road markings to paint the people on the ground outside Wilson Road Foundation Building at his interim show, led to encounters with people he would never usually meet, unusual machinery, and unexpected tales of a pasty and a broken tooth (Wynn 2020).

Figure 10: Rory Wynn, Wonky People project, 2020. Photograph. © Rory Wynn.

Figure 11: Rory Wynn, Wonky People, 2020. Ink on paper. © Rory Wynn.

Fae Clementson Sharples researched the Criminal Justice Public Order Act 1994 which granted powers to remove gatherings of twenty people or more where music is played. Fae simulated dance get-togethers and explored territories on which the ‘raves’ of the 1990s took place (Figure 12), acknowledging that it helped her engage more authentically with someone else’s story and what the audience may or may not feel when looking at her final image (Figure 13) (Clementson Sharples 2020).

Figure 12: Fae Clementson Sharples, Camberwell students performing method illustration, 2020. Photograph. © Fae Clementson Sharples.

Figure 13: Fae Clementson Sharples, Fabric banner illustrating the Criminal Justice Act 1994, 2020. Photograph. © Fae Clementson Sharples.

Laam Kwok identified with feeling like a mushroom growing in isolation during the first COVID-19 lockdown. Throughout her final year Laam grew mushrooms to understand them better and began turning them into characters (Figures 14–17). Laam ultimately

transformed the feeling into a cuddly connected object by creating a mouldy teddy rug (Figures 18 and 19) (Kwok 2021).

Figure 14: Laam Kwok, Method illustration – sculpting mushrooms, 2021. Image. © Laam Kwok.

Figure 15: Laam Kwok, Method illustration – growing mushrooms, 2021. Image. © Laam Kwok.

Figure 16: Laam Kwok, Method illustration – growing mushrooms, 2021. Image. © Laam Kwok.

Figure 17: Laam Kwok, Method illustration – mushroom characters, 2021. Image. © Laam Kwok.

Figure 18: Laam Kwok, Mouldy teddies, 2021. Image. © Laam Kwok.

Figure 19: Laam Kwok, Mouldy teddy rug, 2021. Image. © Laam Kwok.

Method illustration works from what Rogoff (2019) in ‘Becoming research’ would call familiar realms and inherited knowledges. This a notion of ‘Becoming research’ where research becomes the thing itself and a process of becoming. Rogoff emphasizes that research need not be an elevated activity requiring substantial prior knowledge, or an urge to find things out but can also be the stuff of daily life, such as hardships encountered and that everyone researches (Rogoff 2019: n.pag.).

Method illustration may require that the researcher step into another’s role or experience and as Rachel suggests above, through referencing Klein ([1959] 1988: 252) that this requires a respect for the space that is entered. The positioning of self within *method illustration* both illuminates and destabilizes meaning through the temporal nature of the self and meaning. As Boylorn (2011) discusses in the essay ‘Gray or for colored girls who are tired of chasing rainbows: Race and reflexivity’, studies and interests are implicated by standpoints and reflection itself, by how stories and issues overlap and intersect. By

researching and examining others, Boylorn simultaneously situates herself and reflects on master identity factors (race, sex, gender, etc.) and how they compare to those of the participants (Boylorn 2011: 179). You could argue that meaning and the self are consistently re-discoverable and that we are performers as current and past selves, bringing experience to this overall rehearsal and discovering each other and a shared creative output.

Figure 20: Olivia Wing Cheung makes rain in the 'Write It Project', 2017. Photograph. © Jen Franklin.

By making things tangible, *method illustration* provides a way into making that can lead to new discoveries and unpredictable outcomes. Sometimes we need tangible things to touch, be or become. Illustration is accepted as an act of augmentation by incorporating metaphor or exaggeration. When *method illustration* meets its metaphorical limit something fascinating occurs.

If a student needs to experience riding a unicorn *method illustration* may fall short, but one could strap a cone to the head of a horse and see what happens. Actions carried out in research are a risk, and the value of *method illustration* may be assessed retrospectively in relation to what is discovered, lost or what has serendipitously furthered the aims of the project. As with other forms of research this could lead to a wonderful discovery or could just be a disappointing unicorn ride.

RET and JF: In its microcosmic state we could consider the BA Illustration course as a performance and a rehearsal. We are all performers when participating in illustration as the viewer or the maker. *Method illustration* offers us the opportunity to be non-hierarchical in the studio. It is the unpredictability of daily life and the experience we each bring that we hope will challenge structures and established narratives. Stanislavski's methods have been described as encouraging spectators to become passive, losing their identity and critical reflection. What we would advise is that our students step back from the character or

embodiment and ‘examine it once again from the outside’ (Rouse 1995: 240). In a climate of dismantling power structures of authorized knowledge production, if lived experience is to continue to be useful, we need to expand, beyond leaping simply from one individual story to another, by engaging in making, reading, studying, listening and by critically experiencing.

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