

## **A Refractive (Re)view**

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**When examining the relative merits of different schools, we can sometimes forget that graphic design education programmes are themselves objects of design. In this collaboratively authored chapter, current participants, staff and recent graduates of the MA Graphic Media Design course at London College of Communication, University of the Arts London, collectively consider the ways in which the shaping and reshaping of a course can influence participants' practices and their publics.**

This essay asks: what can it mean to approach graphic design education as a piece of design today? It does so through a collective review of practices underway and emergent on the MA Graphic Media Design (MA GMD) course at London College of Communication (LCC), University of the Arts London (UAL). Members of the course team, current participants and graduates came together to think through the contexts, conditions and concerns that emerge in and through a course design, speaking to and from distinct standpoints, histories and ambitions.

We adopt refraction, rather than reflection, as a metaphorical device to help us recognise and discuss some of the core priorities of the MA GMD course design: the cultivation and maintenance of critical practices in and through graphic design, socialisation of practice in progress, and making design research public. We share examples of 'designed' actions, from small to big, in reference to these priorities.

The text follows a line of questioning and reasoning, interspersed with commentary gathered during a roundtable discussion comprised of graduates and current participants, which revealed different perspectives on recognition, progression, community and language. We hope to mobilise further discussion on how the design of a graphic design course may support participants, graduates and course teams in determining their own interrelationality and territory of action in the world today.

### **What can it mean to approach graphic design education as a piece of design today?**

**Participant:** If we talk about [design education] as a piece of design, then it's definitely a piece of design co-authorship. It feels like a piece of design where there are different authors shaping the education.

**Participant:** If you plan, then it's a piece of design. I would say [the MA] is designed by me. I'm taking information from different places, with me at the centre, and trying to put everything together.

**Participant:** I never thought of [the MA] as a piece of design, but saw it as part of the process in relation to what happened before—as an expanded piece of education itself.

**Graduate:** I started thinking about education as a piece of design when introduced to Nina Paim’s book *Taking a Line for a Walk* (2016), seeing a course as something that is shared, and which can be reproduced and experimented with, rather than something developed in a linear way.

MA GMD is a 15-month postgraduate course, launched in October 2015 at LCC, UAL. The course, which is situated within the Design School, builds upon the legacy of the MA Graphic Design, MA Design Writing Criticism and MA Typo/Graphics courses before it, but with a renewed focus—to explore the use of graphic design as a critical tool to investigate the complexities of contemporary society.

The course has been active during a period of considerable uncertainty in the UK: ongoing mayhem of national governance, continuing (looping) revisions to the engagement between the UK and Europe, incremental and notable increases to the cost of studying in higher education, precarity of future employment, the climate crisis, and much more besides. Change is nothing new or surprising in educational contexts. In fact, according to Anja Groten, the educational space is one in which we are confronted with the ‘temporality of constantly changing relations’.[1] This period of uncertainty, however, is significant in terms of its direct impact on the requirements and potential of postgraduate graphic design education. Design educators and institutions are being called to action. We specifically ask: what can a master’s course in the subject/practice of graphic design do to speak to these complex conditions and times? How do we mobilise action within and beyond current institutional parameters (such as validation processes, budget negotiations, shifting cohort dynamics and profiles)? How can we design and deploy a curriculum for a practice (and discourse) that is seen to be ‘truncated by the limits of its own criticality’? [2]

The course approaches these questions by inviting engagement with, and interrogation of, key critical perspectives of our time. We ask what it means to seek, gather, analyse, interpret and materialise propositions into/through/for (or as/from/against/in) graphic design research practice(s)?[3]

We acknowledge that these are large ambitions and difficult tasks. We realise this approach requires an examination and revision of our practices as educators, researchers, designers and otherwise. It requires a consideration of how we learn, as much as what we learn. We realise that we cannot approach our practices alone. We believe there is a need to find a shared language and to establish reciprocal modes of working. We cultivate a site of participation, to work with one another. For this reason, the statuses of ‘student’ and ‘tutor’ are rethought and are recast simply as ‘participants’, where we work alongside and in relation to one another. We are enacting this to alert

participants to the constructed (i.e., designed) nature of the institution, to motivate among participants a critical assessment of the distribution of power and agency in their prior academic histories (which, typically, are characterised by a top-down, ‘banking system of education’),[4] and to introduce the practice and potential of ‘linguaging’ as a tool to build new realities for and through design.[5]

**How can we address replication in and through a course design?**

**Participant:** Is there such a thing as graduating with a singular MA?

**Graduate 1:** No way.

**Participant:** Is it a fallacy to say that you’re graduating with your own practice?

**Graduate 1:** You already had the practice when you came here.

**Graduate 2:** Yeah? I didn’t know that!

Light is a familiar metaphor for knowledge, and a mirror—as a device used to reflect light—extends the metaphor to helpfully describe the ways in which education can direct and reposition knowledge. However, we don’t see education as a purely reflective exercise—as one intended to replicate the image of a given curriculum or student body, or to direct light on or from a fixed point. We need to acknowledge that the lived realities of many people are not currently reflected in the institution, due to increasing issues of access and privilege. This problem extends the point beyond the institution, into contemporary design practice. We argue reflection risks replication, and omits that which sits outside of the frame.

On MA GMD, rather than reflecting knowledge, we choose to refract it. With a basic definition of ‘refraction’—the phenomenon of light or sound breaking up, only to be deflected along oblique lines through and between mediums of varying density—we understand that the trajectories that bring our participants to us are omnidirectional and that they move at different speeds. Instead of installing ‘mirrors’ we set up ‘prisms’ throughout the course that have some ability to reflect but which, more crucially, continue to refract the routes of individuals. These prisms represent ‘mediums of varying density’ and provide conditions that every participant will encounter differently, via their own research and experimentation, and which they will pass through on their own terms or according to their own lines of inquiry. By consciously and recurrently ‘breaking up’ to move through the system in a divergent way, our participants find greater possibilities for intersection and collaboration, as well as the opportunity to transgress the edges of the framework altogether. This approach speaks to the views shared in ‘An Ecology of Practice’, in which Isabelle Stengers states: ‘Approaching a practice then means approaching it as it diverges, that is, feeling its borders, experimenting with the questions which practitioners may accept as relevant, even if they are not their own questions, rather than posing insulting questions that would lead them to mobilise and transform the border into a defence against their outside.’[6]

### **How is a refractive approach enacted through a course design?**

**Participant:** You come here thinking the education is on the paper, on the brief, but it's not.

**Graduate:** It's about finding allies, but also about finding people that challenge your view and what you're doing.

**Participant:** We all recognise we've developed a common sense of language. That is something that has changed a lot—the way we frame ourselves—the vocabulary we use now to talk about our work. And it keeps changing...

The course design initiates various moments for participants to think through their place in practice. Below, we set out two significant examples, which behave as prisms within and beyond the course: The Reciprocal Studio and A Line Which Forms a Volume.

Each year, The Reciprocal Studio takes form through a series of commissioned collaborative workshops authored and led by guest practitioners in response to a negotiated socio-political concern of the time. Our guests and participants are invited to work with a learning and teaching model based on reciprocity—to use this period to collectively investigate and to further their own, and one another's, knowledge through the procedures of a research-oriented graphic design practice. We refer to the work of author bell hooks here, as we aim to build community 'in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigour ... to receive actively knowledge that enhances our intellectual development and our capacity to live more fully in the world'.[7]

In 2018, we hosted '(Re)distributed Media: Leakage',[8] a set of workshops that called for a review of our increasingly polluted information-scapes. We were interested in how design research could be used to articulate insights about the governance, provenance and authority of information. Our guest practitioners FRAUD, Ruben Pater, Marwan Kaabour and David Benqué approached these concerns through distinct methods to make sense of specific issues concerned with 'leakage'.[9]

FRAUD put forward a proposition for design-as-conflict: a framework that presents strategies of design-led inquiry to reveal coercive and operational modes of conflict. Unlike approaches that seek conflict resolution, they viewed conflict as a desirable and productive force. David Benqué initiated an exploration of the graph as a site for critical investigation and speculative imagination. The participants' graphs were not to be seen as an end in themselves but as a grounding for critical practice and discursive research, with the aim to unpack, comment on or propose alternatives to existing systems and narratives. Marwan Kaabour called for a close reading of the significance of language in political discourse. Sifting through the complex landscape of political rhetoric across media platforms, the participants explored the ways in which verbal and visual language is used by politicians (and celebrities) to shape the narrative and to define the context around pressing issues today. Working on-site within specific localities, but with reference to open-source datasets, Ruben Pater and the participants operated as

citizen journalists to devise and distribute hyper-local disaster risk reports through mapping design.

More recently, in 2019, a workshop series titled ‘The Reciprocal Studio: On Distraction’ inquired into moments of distraction as a strategy to think into (and against) a set of perceived requirements of design—to clarify, to simplify, to render knowable, and so on. This series invited contributions from guest practitioners Confusion of Tongues with Susan Schuppli, Demystification Committee with Tony Sampson, FRAUD with Anna Santomauro, and Francisco Laranjo with Laura Gordon.[10]

Departing from a thorough image reading of the Frontex Photo Competition archive,[11] Confusion of Tongues and the participants staged a performative exhibition and published a catalogue asking questions regarding the visual rhetoric of contemporary EU border governance that touched upon meta-themes such as the privatisation of public services, verticalization of power and curating within security politics. Initially drawing insights from the extreme case of the financial trader, The Demystification Committee led the participants through a process of de-optimising and re-optimising the self, managing and reducing the conditions of distraction.

FRAUD invited participants to perform a *décollage* of key factors embedded in surveillance technology and migrant flows,[12] critically tracing links between political, climactic, technological and legal aspects of borders in the Gibraltar region. Finally, Laranjo’s provocation — ‘we live in an age of distraction because distraction is profitable’ — motivated the participants to examine the political, social and cultural dimensions of design, and their place within a critical practice of openness and intellectual rigour ... to receive actively

Recognising a growing interest in the potentialities of design writing and collective publishing from, through and beyond the institution, in 2017 the MA GMD worked with Bryony Quinn (editorial advisor) and Daly-Lyon (design advisors) to establish *A Line Which Forms a Volume (ALWFAV)*, a critical reader of design research authored, edited, designed and published by course participants.[13] It set out to investigate strategies to make graphic design research public — to make it voluble — and to make it resonate with multiple publics across LCC, UAL and beyond. It has become a space devised to sit outside of the core curriculum — to transgress the institutional frame — supported by an advisory team of guest editors and designers, taking form in an annual publication, in print and online, and a curated symposium hosted at LCC.

Each year, MA GMD participants are invited to seek out their public(s) and to re-imagine their collectivity through design. The contributions, taking form as critical texts, visual essays, poems, interviews, articles, biographies, scripts, instructions, indexes and more are captured in varied states of becoming. ALWFAV I editor Gabriela Matuszyk explains how the editorial model considers various states of research in an interview with Grafik

magazine:

The editorial model we constructed for ALWFAV 1 derived from Michel Butor's 'The Book as Object', an essay where he referred to book publishing as a 'freezing' method for preservation of language. This was an important consideration when approaching our material, as the research is not only of its time contextually, but it also represents varied stages of research in practice — for some MA participants the act of publication symbolised an end to a project, for others it was a prompt for continuation, or a marker for establishing new design-led inquiries.[14]

As each volume materialises, the frame of collectivity is extended and diffused in a manner that supports the participants in identifying their place in the design and construction of a community itself. ALWFAV 2 contributor Matthew Stadler reminds us 'it is imperative that we publish, not only as a means to counter the influence of a hegemonic 'public' but also to reclaim the space in which we imagine ourselves and our collectivity'. Contributions from 'allies' whom the participants have identified or incorporated in their practices, such as Stuart Bertolotti-Bailey, Eleanor Vonne Brown, Sophie Demay, James Langdon, Ramia Mazé, Peter Nencini, Jack Self, Matthew Stuart and Gavin Wade, offer visibility and locality for an otherwise invisible or illegible community of expanded practice.

### **(Re)view**

**Participant 1:** I don't know where I stop. I don't know the border.

**Participant 2:** If there is a border?

**Participant 1:** If there is no border, how are you going to make progress?

Oscillating from micro to macro, institutional to personal, this exercise in collectively approaching the MA GMD course as a piece of design has offered an opportunity for the participants and graduates of the course to come together to think through various contexts, conditions and challenges affecting design education today. We noted the complexity of the challenges at the outset and sought to identify moments within the design of the MA GMD course where we can observe action underway.

The Reciprocal Studio has developed into a framework for the course to seek out and support a plurality of practices, and to collaboratively investigate critical concerns of our time through design. We observe new modes of working, expanded methodologies and a consideration for alternative models of practice seeping into the culture of the course.

A Line Which Forms a Volume emerged from a concern, observed in participants' practices, to make graphic design research public. Shifting constellations (design, editing and publishing teams), expanding networks (contributors, collaborators and producers) and divergent modes of address (events and distribution channels) provoke

a concern for laying claim to a shared space that supports and socialises critical practices of design. The move towards refraction prompted us to question replication and to work towards a sharper consideration of everyone and everything that presently sits outside of the institutional frame. As we progress onwards, we are reminded of the imperative to work toward practices of inclusion, interruption, resistance and action, by way of refraction or otherwise.

[1] Anja Groten, 'Design Friction', in *Modes of Criticism 4: Radical Pedagogy*, ed. Francisco Laranjo (Eindhoven: Onomatopée, 2019): 74.

[2] Anne Bush, 'Double Vision: Graphic Design Criticism and the Question of Authority', *Modes of Criticism 2: Critique of Method*, ed. Francisco Laranjo (Eindhoven: Onomatopée, 2016): accessed 21 October 2019: <http://modesofcriticism.org/double-vision/>.

[3] On the 'into/through/for' formulation, see: Christopher Frayling, 'Research in Art and Design' in *Research Papers*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Royal College of Art, 1993/4). On 'as/from/against/ in', see: *Graphic Design Educators' Network, Beyond the Margins: tools, strategies and urgencies transforming graphic design research*, accessed 21 October 2019: <https://www.graphicdesigneducators.network/events/beyond-the-margins-tools-strategies-and-urgencies-transforming-graphic-design-research/>.

[4] Paolo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2017): 72.

[5] 'Languaging Glossary', *metadesigners*, accessed 28 October 2019, <https://metadesigners.org/Languaging-Glossary>

[6] Isabelle Stengers, 'An Ecology of Practice', *Cultural Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (March 2005): 184.

[7] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 40

[8] This workshop series was extended to formulate a weekend long public programme for the *Hope to Nope: Graphics & Politics 2008–18* exhibition at the Design Museum, London (June 2018).

[9] FRAUD (Audrey Samson and Francisco Gallardo) is an art-research duo based in London. Ruben Pater is a graphic designer, writer and tutor based in Amsterdam. Marwan Kaabour is a graphic designer based in London. David Benqué is a designer and researcher based in London.

[10] *Confusion of Tongues* (Marthe Prins and Benedict Waishaupt) is an artist-affiliation based in Amsterdam and Berlin. Susan Schuppli is Reader and Director of Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths. Demystification Committee (Oliver Smith and Francesco Tacchini) is chaired in London and Berlin. Tony Sampson is a critical theorist and Reader in Digital Media Cultures at University of East London. FRAUD (Audrey Samson and Francisco Gallardo) is an art-research duo based in London. Anna Santomauro is Program Curator at Arts Catalyst. Francisco Laranjo is a graphic designer, writer and researcher based in Portugal. Laura Gordon is a designer, researcher and lecturer based in London.

[11] Frontex is the semi-private governing agency held responsible for the management of all border control in the Schengen area.

[12] Décollage is an artistic method which inscribes itself within critical technical practice, concerned with uncovering obfuscated material conditions of production.

[13] A Line Which Forms a Volume borrows its title from a subheading in Michel Butor's essay 'The Book as Object', in *Inventory* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970). Under this heading, the French novelist explores how writing records threads of speech and thoughts by dividing and stacking this continuous stream: 'every word follows one other, precedes one other. As a result, they take their places along a line activated by a meaning, along an axis.'

[14] Theo Inglis, 'Line Dance', *Grafik*, 22 February 2018, [grafik.net/category/feature/line-dance](http://grafik.net/category/feature/line-dance).