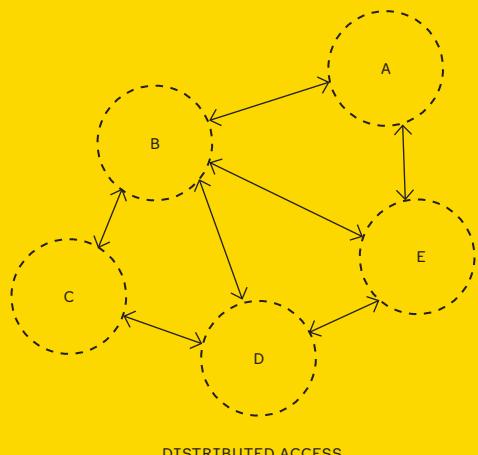


# Refiguring Relations

## A

*A Book That Grows* → Proj. F, Proj. L, 3.4  
accessibility →  
as conditional → 3.5, Proj. L  
as distribution → 3.4  
as familiarity (stereotype) → 3.2.2  
as familiarity (specificity) → 3.2.4, 3.3.1  
as inclusivity → 3.2.3, 3.2.4  
as reciprocity → 3.4  
through redistribution → 3.6  
art book → 3.4, Int. 3  
*As Luck Would Have It* → Proj. B  
attention → 2.6.2, Proj. J  
audience → 2.4, 2.5, 2.6.1, 3.2.4, Int. 2, Int. 3  
as public → 3.4



## B

behavior → 2.4, Int. 2  
book → Proj. F, Proj. L

Daphne Hsu  
Graphic Design MFA 2021

## C

circulation → 3.2.2, 3.4, Proj. F  
collaboration → 2.3, Proj. L, Int. 1, Int. 2, Int. 3  
as conversation → 2.2.3  
as process → 2.2.1  
relational dynamics → 2.3  
collectively built → Proj. A, Int. 2  
common ground → Int. 1  
*Commonplace* → Proj. G  
community → 1.1.2, 3.2.4, 3.4, Proj. F, Int. 1, Int. 2, Int. 3, Int. 4  
*Community Reader* → Proj. F  
conditions →  
as access → 3.5, Proj. B  
as scripts → 2.6.1  
conditional design → 2.4, 2.6.1  
connection → Proj. A, Int. 1

## D

decentralization → Proj. L  
defamiliarization → 3.3.1, Int. 2  
default → Proj. K  
dependence → 1.1.1  
*Design School Briefs* → Proj. N, 3.6  
distribution → 3.4, Proj. L, Int. 3, Int. 4

## E

everyday → 3.3.1  
experience → Proj. J, Proj. M  
experiential design → Int. 2  
exquisite corpse → 2.3

## F

*Furies* → Proj. I, 3.3.2  
future → 4.1

Rhode Island  
School of Design

# Refiguring Relations

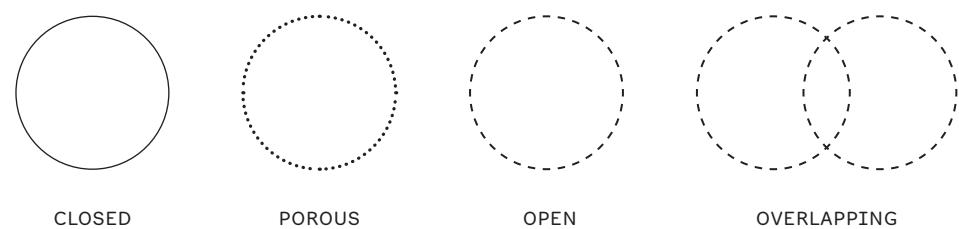


FIG. 1—LEVELS OF OPENNESS IN RELATIONSHIPS

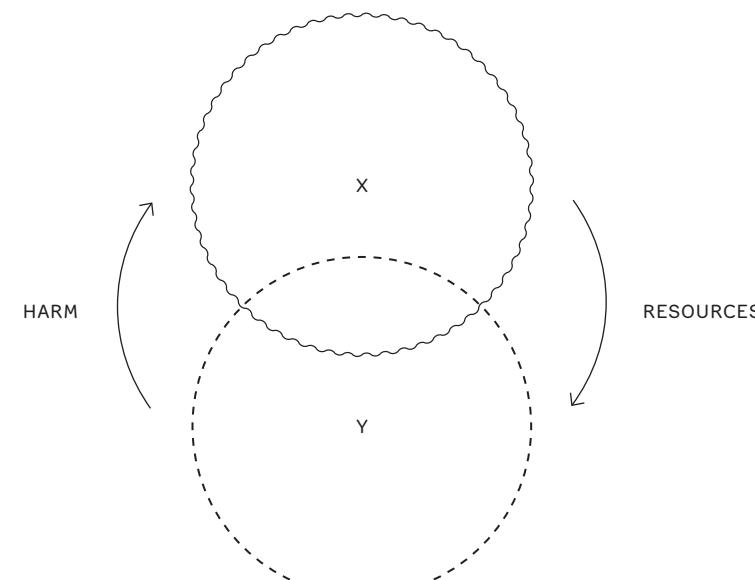


FIG. 2 – PARASITIC RELATIONSHIP

Daphne Hsu  
Rhode Island School of Design  
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## ABSTRACT

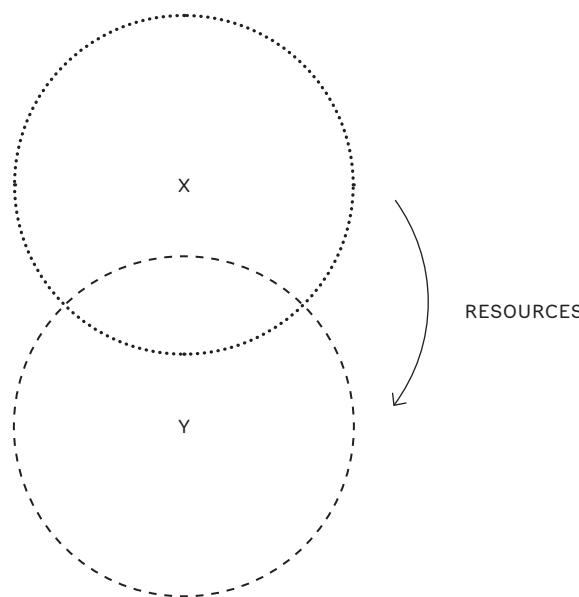


FIG. 3—COMMENSALISTIC RELATIONSHIP

*Refiguring Relations* sets conditions for interdependence and visualizes the affective relationships that people have with one another. Through scripts and participatory experiences, my work explores, challenges, and formulates expressions of collaboration. I extend spaces of overlap between individuals to encourage connection and alliance building, however temporary, slow, or small. In reading experiences, both print and digital, models of circulation and accessibility allow the audience to see and affect each others' interactions. This thesis assembles methodologies and blueprints for reciprocal engagement, between designer and collaborators, designer and participants, and among participants themselves.

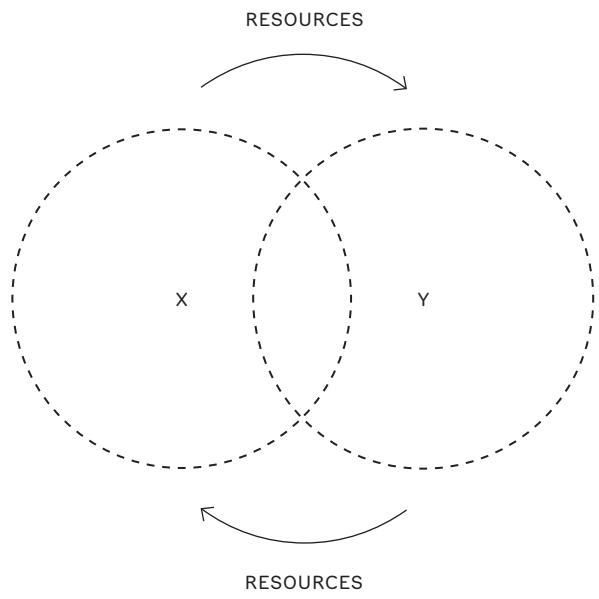


FIG. 4 – MUTUALISTIC RELATIONSHIP

5	<b>ABSTRACT</b>	
8	<b>PART 1</b> <b>December 2020–March 2021</b>	INTRODUCTION
14	<b>PART 2</b> <b>What constitutes a collaboration?</b>	ESSAY & PROJECTS
60	<b>Mary Welcome</b>	INTERVIEW
70	<b>Keetra Dean Dixon &amp; Kelsey Elder</b>	INTERVIEW
84	<b>INTERMISSION</b>	
116	<b>PART 3</b> <b>What makes graphic design accessible?</b>	ESSAY & PROJECTS
160	<b>Jayme Yen &amp; Tom Eykemans</b>	INTERVIEW
174	<b>Mj Balvanera</b>	INTERVIEW
186	<b>PART 4</b> <b>May 2021 –</b>	EPILOGUE
190	<b>REFERENCES &amp; ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>	

# December 2020 – March 2021

How far are you in the future? Where are you reading this?

It is December 2020, nine months after RISD stopped holding in-person classes and subsequently shut down campus—the beginning of the COVID-19 virus pandemic in the United States. I sit in the corner of my living room at my desk, where I've sat nearly every day since mid-March. I just finished up two group project meetings on video chat. Tomorrow morning, I will swab the insides of my nostrils for the fifth time as part of RISD's surveillance testing protocol. I barely leave my apartment, so I anticipate a negative result. But then again, a plumber—my first guest in months—came into my apartment earlier this week to look for the source of a water leak; later that afternoon, I spent some time printing in the graduate studio. But then again, the plumber wore a mask and I opened the windows to circulate the air; at the studio, only one other person sat way on the other side of the room. But then again, infection rates in Rhode Island have been on the rise...

The pandemic challenges every aspect of day-to-day life. Because the highly contagious and deadly virus spreads through the air, one of the most effective ways for people to keep each other safe is to remain apart. The pandemic response underscores just how dependent we, as humans, are on one another. We change our behaviors to keep each other healthy—and not just the people we come in direct contact with but also the people they see. The plumber did not just interact with me when I opened the door for him, I also carried the air we shared together to the studio. Beyond interpersonal interactions, the pandemic exacerbates existing hardships in the United States and brings other problems into stark relief. Millions of people lost work and the employer-sponsored health care coverage tied to their jobs. Essential workers, from medical professionals to food service employees to maintenance people, face pressure to find child care following the closing of schools and other community centers. Elderly, immunocompromised, and incarcerated people are most at risk of catching the virus, yet have arguably been neglected by the government.

## 1.1.2

In March, a group of RISD graduate students quickly organized a COVID-19 Grad Task Force to advocate on behalf of their classmates for transparency and aid from the school's administration. They started a care network spreadsheet for grad students to share their resources, not only to supply personal tools following the loss of access to school facilities but also to step in to help with groceries and housing. Across the country, community and neighborhood groups rapidly mobilized, organizing everything from relief funds to sidewalk fridges with free food. In "Can I Help You?" writer Jia Tolentino contextualizes these responses: "Everything circles a bewildering paradox: other people are both a threat and lifeline. Physical connection could kill us, but civic connection is the only way to survive."<sup>1</sup> This civic connection

<sup>1</sup> Jia Tolentino, "Can I Help You?" *New Yorker*, May 18, 2020, 24.

takes the shape of mutual aid, which involves networks of people committed to meeting the basic survival needs of fellow community members. In mid-March, organizer and educator Mariame Kaba and Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez held a public conference about building mutual aid, encouraging people to connect with their neighbors. In the toolkit they put out, mutual aid is defined as "a practice and politics that emphasizes solidarity.... We recognize that our well-being, health and dignity are all bound up in each other."<sup>2</sup> Over the summer, I sewed masks and bagged groceries for a grassroots organization working with immigrant and undocumented families. My friends in Seattle raised money and delivered food and supplies for local mutual aid groups. There is a history of this grassroots mobilization following disaster. The work of these mutual aid groups is possible because of existing networks. In *A Paradise Built in Hell*, writer and historian Rebecca Solnit lifts up these responses, writing, "When all the ordinary divides and patterns are shattered, people step up—not all, but the great preponderance—to become their brothers' keepers. And that purposefulness and connectedness bring joy even amid death, chaos, fear, and loss."<sup>3</sup>

Both Tolentino and the "Mutual Aid 101" toolkit clarify that the mutual aid projects exist outside of the non-profit world with its

ties to the government and are staunchly not charity. Tolentino writes, "Both mutual aid and charity address the effects of inequality, but mutual aid is aimed at root causes—at the structures that created inequality in the first place."<sup>4</sup> Organizing, connecting with neighbors, and redistributing money and resources to address the needs that arise, like making rent or getting groceries, are actions that run counter to capitalist competition and extraction. Nor are these types of support networks new. In the late 1960s, the Black Panther Party built programs offering free breakfasts, ambulance services, and medical clinics for Black communities, which met basic needs and served as spaces for education and organizing.<sup>5</sup> When my family lived in Cincinnati

<sup>5</sup> Dean Spade, "Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival," *Social Text* 142, no. 1 (March 2020): 136, <http://www.deanspade.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Mutual-Aid-Article-Social-Text-Final.pdf>.

during my childhood, we were part of an informal community of other first generation Taiwanese and Chinese immigrants who offered each other childcare, help in translating school and government documents, and material support if someone fell ill. Although these interdependent relationships form in response to urgent need, they also build and shift over time. In late summer, I spoke with a friend who's involved in the strategic planning of one of the pandemic-related mutual aid groups in Seattle; she was already working through distribution scenarios and volunteer engagement for the winter and beyond. People have always depended on each other and supported one another as a mode of survival and being. The reality of the pandemic made the present uncertain. Even so, neighbors banded together to imagine different futures.

## 1.1.3

I applied to grad school after six years of working as a graphic designer. I held jobs in a mix of spaces: non-profit, client-based, and corporate. Alongside friends, I also initiated independent projects. With this mixed bag of experiences, I wanted to clarify the values I hold when making work and working with others. Living through this pandemic pulled me back to what I care about: the people and conditions of the place I live, equality of access to resources and opportunities, democracy, dignity, and the opportunity for self-determination. My response is not unique. Strangers asked about their pandemic experience on "It's Been

<sup>4</sup> Tolentino, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Tolentino, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Tolentino, 26.

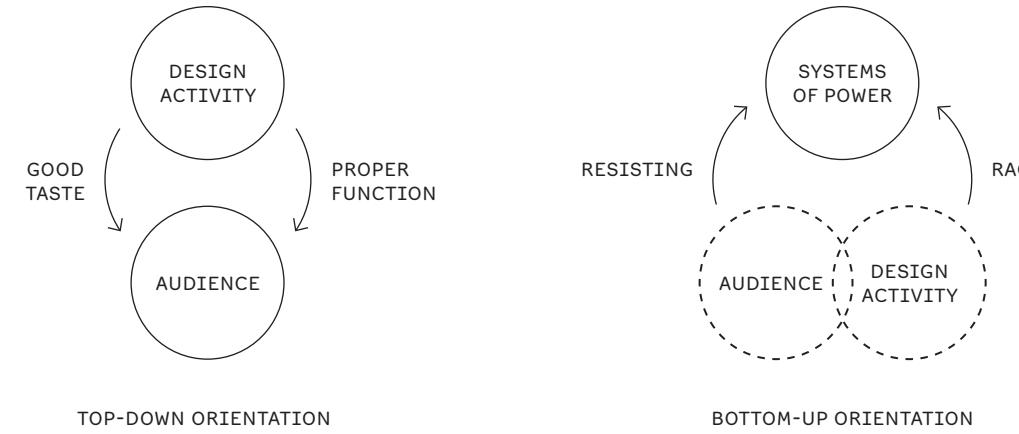


FIG. 5—NARRATIVES OF GRAPHIC DESIGN HISTORY (→1.1.4)

"A Minute with Sam Sanders" expressed similar re-evaluations of priorities and relationships. One interviewee expressed, "A lot of stuff that I thought was going to make or break me wasn't really important at all."<sup>1</sup> During the weeks following the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake in San Francisco, Solnit describes the atmosphere she observed:

<sup>1</sup> Sam Sanders, "Our Pandemic Year," March 12, 2021, in *It's Been a Minute with Sam Sanders*, produced by Jinée West, Andrea Gutierrez, and Sylvie Dougis, podcast, MP3 audio, 11:35.

"Friendship and love counted for a lot, long-term plans and old anxieties for very little. Life was situated in the here and now, and many inessentials had been pared away."<sup>2</sup> In the immediate onset of the pandemic, it was clear that relationships, connection, sharing, reaching out, taking time, and taking care, in the face of existential uncertainty and grief, all mattered most. How does life go forward? How does work go forward?

## 1.1.4

In the midst of this, I continued attending Zoom school and slowly formulating my thesis focus. The big question, in terms of graduate work, was: where does graphic design fit in?

It's March 2021 now, a year after RISD first shut down and a couple months into vaccine distribution in the United States. As society formulates a new normal, how do we—how do I—hold onto lessons learned and relationships formed during the pandemic? How can graphic designers support visions of more interdependent and just futures that efforts like mutual aid projects work toward?

This may depend on the positioning and the purpose of graphic design as a mode of

public communication. The dominant narrative of graphic design history centers progress and innovation, elevating practitioners as experts on human needs, making useful, artful objects that lead toward balanced lives.<sup>1</sup> This is the

<sup>1</sup> Bruno Munari, *Design as Art*, trans. Patrick Creagh (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 27.

frame I learned in my undergraduate program and started questioning in professional practice. This point of view fails to take into account how limited a designer's perspective can be. The field of graphic design is narrowed to professional practice, excluding other forms of making. It pushes a specific style and aesthetic agenda. Graphic designer and writer Aggie Toppins challenges this framework, providing counter-narratives that span more types of making. The people's

<sup>2</sup> Aggie Toppins, "Four Counter-Narratives for Graphic Design History," CAA 2020, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, February 17, 2020, video of presentation, <https://vimeo.com/392124519>.

history proposes that graphic design is an activity of visual communication that everyone practices in some form: a protest sign, a subculture fanzine, a handcoded website. It's a "bottom-up orientation—design that rages, design that resists—rather than the top-down gifts of good taste and proper function."<sup>2</sup>

The people's history counter-narrative situates graphic design as a tool in community-building, a tool for the masses. For me, this brings up questions of access: who can access design work, and how? Then, what tools and technologies are readily available for use to design. It also brings up considerations of collaboration: how things get made collectively, what hierarchies exist within group work, the shape of public exchange. With a focus on interdependence, these are the questions I began exploring in my graduate work.

In my first year of school, I started off with an interest in challenging dominant systems and structures—how narratives are formed by gatekeepers of power, and where graphic design artifacts and experiences could intervene and expose. I focused in on exploring and facilitating expressions of interdependence among people having experienced the mutual aid coalition building during the pandemic as well as the grassroots George Floyd uprisings in summer 2020.<sup>1</sup> Within the community of students

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Black, "Go Outside," *Artnet*, December 2020, <https://www.artforum.com/print/202009/hannah-black-s-year-in-review-84376>. At RISD, I tested modes of collaboration that engage trust and reciprocity. The experiential projects included in this thesis book, from books

to websites to spatial interventions, outline processes and outcomes that extend the spaces of overlap between individuals to encourage connection and alliance building—however temporary, slow, or small. The work attempts to resituate the designer from an authorial or expert position to one as a collaborator and learner, host and mediator. I dive into two overarching inquiries (and many other questions that arise): What makes graphic design accessible, and what do graphic designers make accessible? What constitutes a collaboration?

This book offers a constellation of answers and references in an essay-as-list form to those two main questions as an initial articulation of values and methods. Embedded within the essays are my projects—experiments, tests—that explore those questions further. The accumulation of the writing and work lay groundwork for a design practice that centers relations and interdependence.

# What constitutes a collaboration?

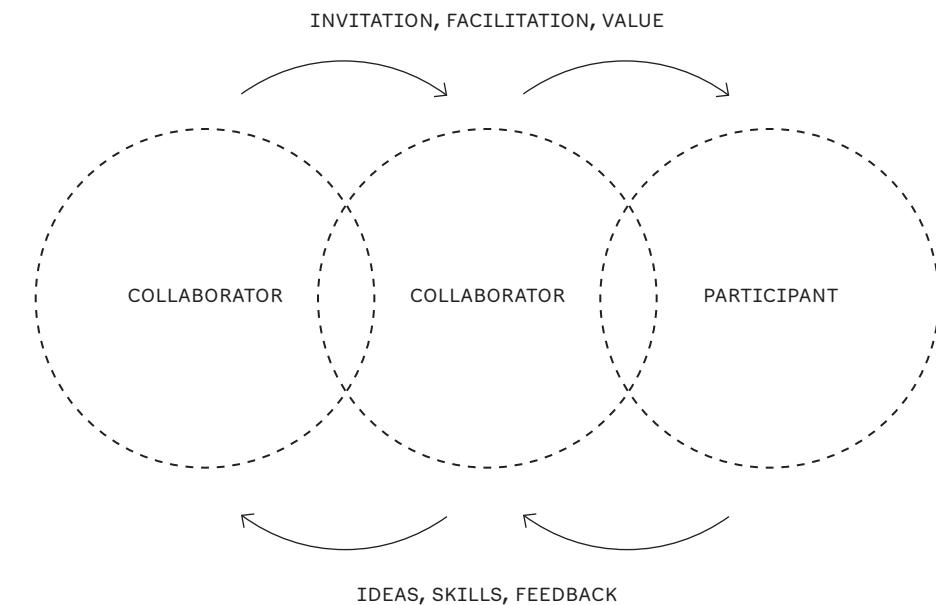


FIG. 6 – COLLABORATIVE EXCHANGES

## ESSAY

- 2.1 OVERVIEW
- 2.2 COLLABORATION AS PROCESS
- 2.3 COLLABORATION DYNAMICS
- 2.4 COLLABORATION AS EXPERIENCE
- 2.5 DESIGNER AS HOST
- 2.6.1 COLLABORATING WITH AUDIENCES
- 2.6.2 TURNING ATTENTION OUTWARD
- 2.6.3 RECIPROCITY

## PROJECTS

- A VIDEO CHAT COMPOSITIONS
- B AS LUCK WOULD HAVE IT
- C STAIRWELL GAMES
- D PROVIDENCE RIVER SCAVENGER HUNT
- E PROPAGANDA GAME
- F A BOOK THAT GROWS: COMMUNITY READER
- G COMMONPLACE

What are the hierarchies? How do people feel value and agency? →2.2.2 →2.2.3 How do dynamics between people play out? What are the ethics? →2.3 How do designers collaborate with audiences and participants? How can audiences author their own collaborations? →2.4 What roles do designers play in relation to audiences and participants? →2.5 How can design encourage collaboration? →2.6

In this section, I first examine the dynamics between collaborators during the process of making something together by pulling from my work experiences before grad school and research into relationality →2.2.1 →2.3. Then, I explore different modes of engaging and working with audiences and participants through the use of prompts, activities, and objects that mediate relations →2.4 →2.5 →2.6.

### 2.2.1 COLLABORATION AS PROCESS

*Work* is both a noun and a verb. In noun form, *work* in graphic design refers to a final form, a deliverable, a designed artifact. As a verb, *work* is the growth of actions, decisions, and conversations—the day-to-day efforts and movement towards the final form. *Work* is process and practice. *Work* is asking questions and reaching towards possible answers through explorations and research. (The works in this book are all tests, all a *working out*.) *Work* takes effort and time. *Work* involves some form of collaboration, whether through conversation about ideas or feedback, or a concerted *working together* toward a goal. The dynamics within a collaboration are naturally interdependent, where the work of one individual is directly affected by the actions of another. What are the conditions—stakes, hierarchies, roles—that influence how people work together? How do these conditions affect the experience of the collaboration? How do they affect the outcome? What constitutes the differences between an extractive relationship versus one in which every collaborator feels the weight of their contribution? Where do people feel agency and value in a collaboration?

### 2.2.2

I started asking these questions in my work experiences before grad school. I was interested in how people could work together better, and

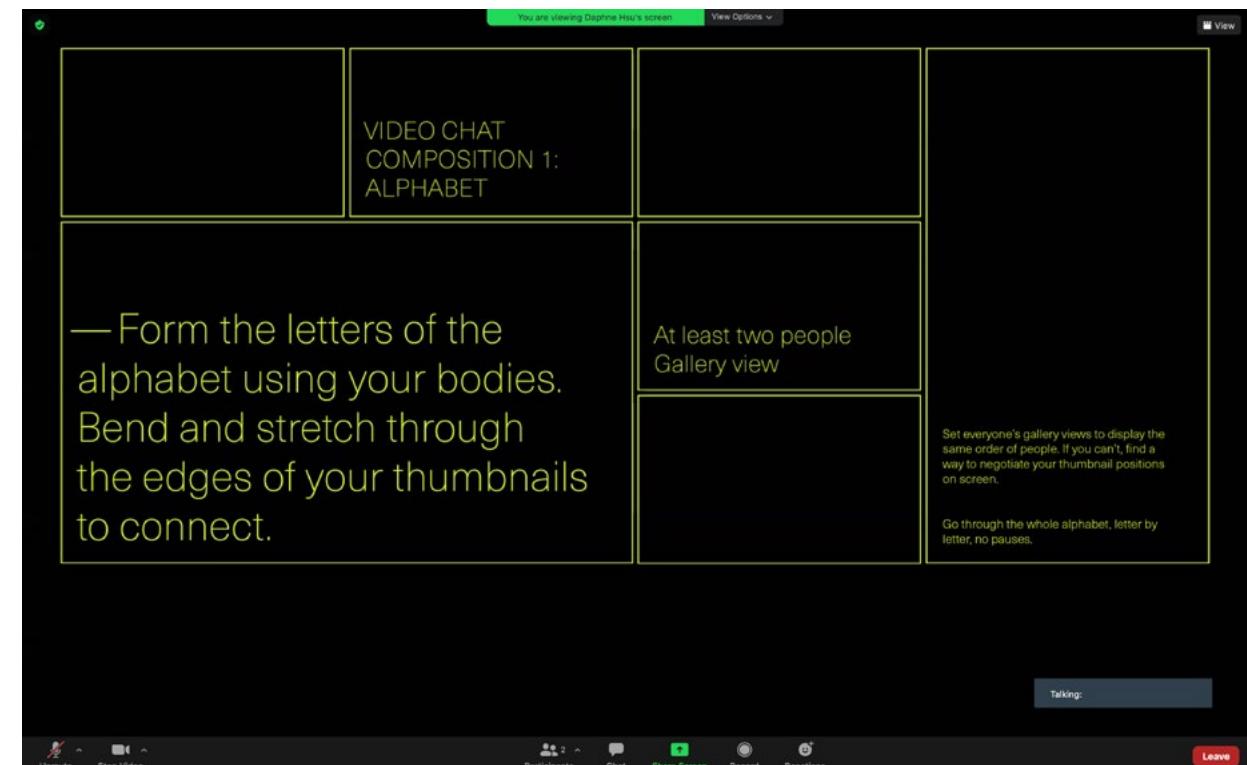
## PROJECT A VIDEO CHAT COMPOSITIONS

This series of scripts and participatory exercises attempt to simulate the intimacy of touch over video chat. The arrangement of thumbnails in the Zoom gallery view gives the impression of porous boundaries from one person's room to the next. One person's shoulder leans into another person's frame, masked by their neighbor's forearm—an accidental moment of closeness. I watched my friend perform with eight other people in a dance choreographed specifically for Zoom. The dancers extended their fingers toward their cameras; their faces lurched forward, then back. I felt like they were reaching out to us in the audience, trying to see us.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *LIMINALE*, choreographed by Alice Gosti, Zoom, February 28, 2021.

“Are you missing anything now that every interaction, everything is becoming facilitated by the videophone?” Writer and podcast host Jenna Wortham asked in May 2020, a few months into the pandemic in the US.<sup>2</sup> The videophone—FaceTime, Zoom,

Screenshared image over Zoom containing the instructions for *Composition 1: Alphabet*.



perhaps more efficiently. Commercial projects, for example, inherently require many hands to pull off. Agency and ownership in this space, however, is tricky. Power dynamics affect the decisions that people can or can't make and do or don't make. This work is a collaboration in the most general sense, in that it takes the cooperation and participation of many doing what's assigned to them to execute a project.

An anecdote: a website I designed at a previous job launched with the wrong font. It was wide and bold when it should have been narrow and light; text blocks escaped the color circles they were designed to live in and pushed all the other elements on the page around. The error was partially an honest mistake, partially the result of limitations in developing cross-team working relationships resulting in miscommunication, and partially a technical bug in the system. The staging environment where the website developers test the site ahead of launch could not load font files, only display defaults like Arial – a strange feature of the aging behemoth that was our corporate employer's web infrastructure. The developers used the wrong font weight (Akzidenz Grotesk Bold Extended), even though the name of the font file (akzidenzgrotesk-boldextended.otf) seemingly matched the name in my design files that I handed off to them (Akzidenz Grotesk). In the test environment, we could only trust that they pulled the correct file; I did not think to double check. When the site went live, this error seemed like the manifestation of the assumptions that masked the gaps in our own working relationships.

From a graphic design perspective, this type of unexpected outcome happens. A color comes out slightly off, a printer miscuts a page. Many hands touch a final piece of work. Slight errors are unavoidable, even interesting.

On the process side, this minor error was also inevitable due to technical limitations of the staging environment and the lack of resources available to update it, but perhaps preventable. The design team I was on and the website development team worked on the same projects, but barriers in communication and resource imbalances kept us from working closely (the developers were understaffed while design held more power). I spent a lot of time at that job trying to figure out better ways to work with people across teams. Perhaps we needed direct communication between the designers and the developers, rather than passing information through project managers. Or closer collaboration so each side can understand

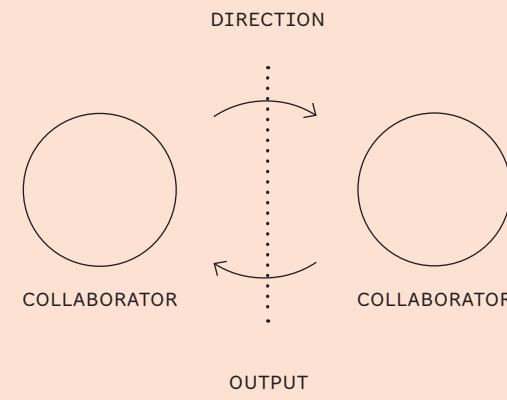


FIG. 7 – DISTANT COLLABORATION



Making the letter A with Allison and Megan Hsu over Zoom. I shared the instructions for *Composition 1: Alphabet*, then we took turns directing each other to form different letters.

and anticipate the other's responsibilities. Or advocacy for more time and support for people executing directives from people with decision-making power. In the end, we were stuck within a system outside of our own powers to change, which then manifested as error after silly error in the work.

### 2.2.3

While large commercial projects require working as part of a group, however hands-on or closed-off, self-initiated and smaller-scale collaborations need more active engagement. These types of collaborations carry personal risk. The work hinges upon the continual buy-in and trust; the relationship between the collaborators affects momentum. A collaboration is only as effective and generative as the mutual effort that goes into it and the feeling of value that comes out of it.

Another anecdote: For a month, my friend Chloe Huber and I made jewelry every night after work. Under the project name Yang & Long, we made good luck charms based on the cultural symbols and rituals of our Chinese and Taiwanese heritages. Chloe suggested we use Shrinky Dink: thin, clear plastic sheets that can be drawn on with marker or colored pencil and cut like paper. The plastic shrinks in the oven in under 10 minutes; the outcome is about 70% smaller than the original, and a millimeter thick. With Shrinky Dink, we could work quickly, prototyping a new piece of jewelry every day. Chloe took the first few days of the month, creating a few sets of earrings based on puns and symbolism. I took the next couple days, bending together earrings that drew from my memories of Lunar New Year celebrations. We continued this back-and-forth over the course of the month. I was influenced by her illustrative style and color explorations. During a phone call with Chloe, she brought up being inspired by my tendency towards abstraction and use of materials like tassels and netting on top of the Shrinky Dinks.<sup>1</sup> A visual conversation opened up between us. Through the making, we carved out space for each other to dive into and share

a part of our lives and memories. This process also instigated conversations with my mom and other people with Chinese heritage in my life about symbolism and history. As we posted our work on Instagram, the project took on a gravitational force, pulling others into our orbit around our shared cultural touchpoints. This

<sup>1</sup> Chloe Huber, interview by author, May 2, 2021.

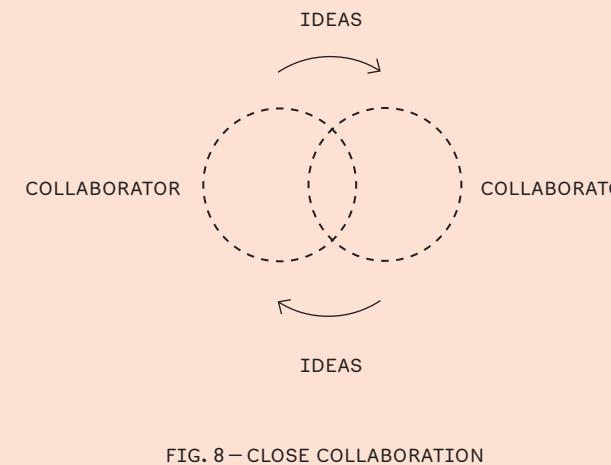


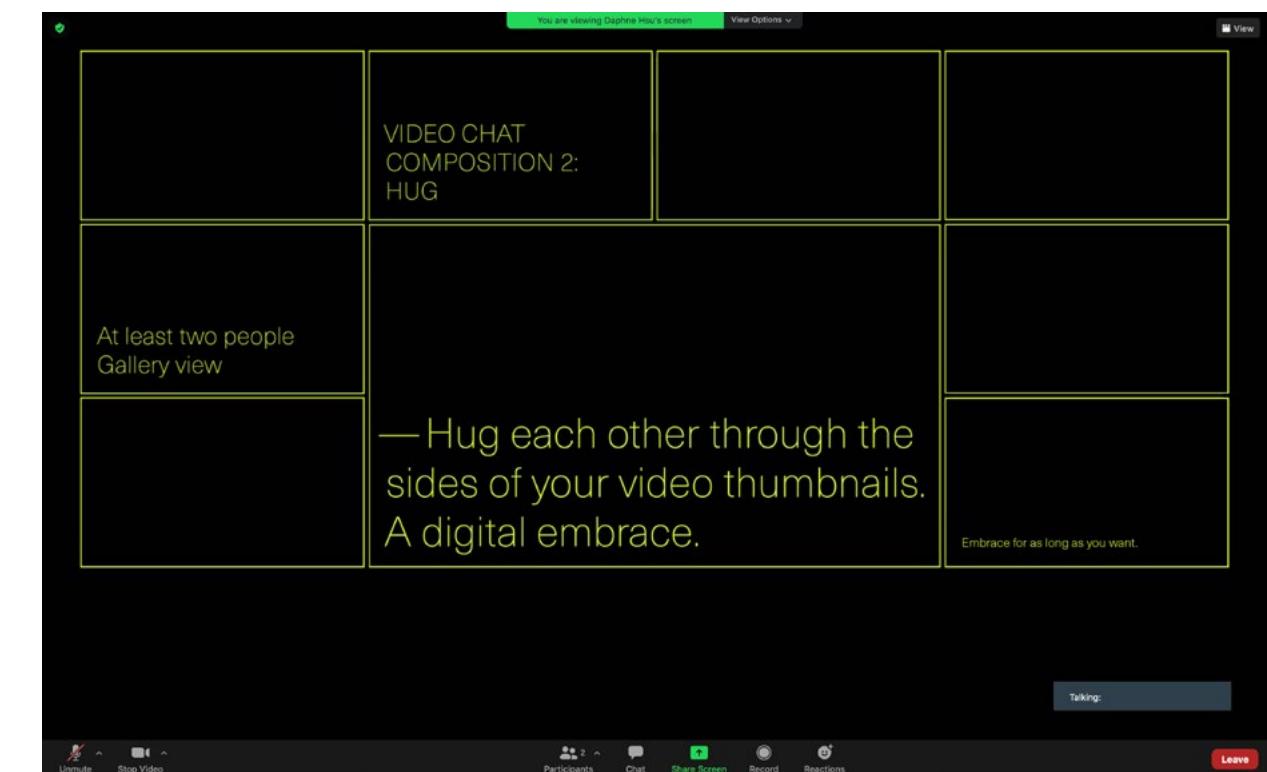
FIG. 8 – CLOSE COLLABORATION

Instagram Stories — became my main way of seeing people outside of my household. Can comfort, care, and familiarity be conveyed through the camera in the same way as the warmth of physical presence? Or are we performing for the camera's gaze?

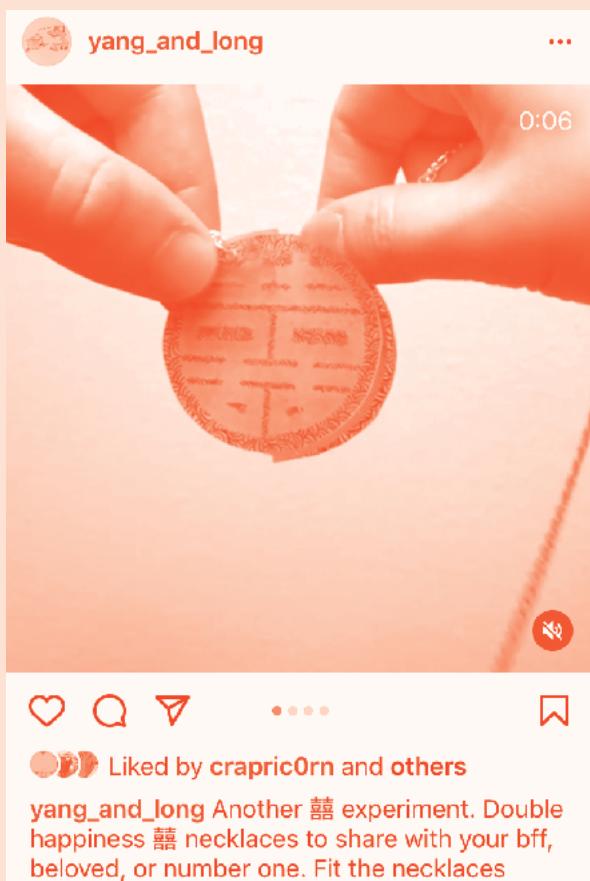
*Video Chat Compositions* originate from a set of instructions that require at least two people to create compositions with their bodies over video chat. They invite people living apart to perform a connection with each other specifically through the digital boundaries imposed by computer cameras and video conferencing software.

For *Composition 1: Alphabet*, participants work together to form the letters of the alphabet using their hands arms, legs, torsos, elbows, knees, and hips. For *Composition 2: Hug*, everyone on the screen turns to the side to give their neighbor a hug through the left and right edges of their thumbnails. For *Composition 3: Connection*, participants stretch their arms out toward each other to simulate holding hands. In enacting all these compositions, I become acutely aware of my position in relation to someone else, making small adjustments to my body to try to meet my neighbor where they are.

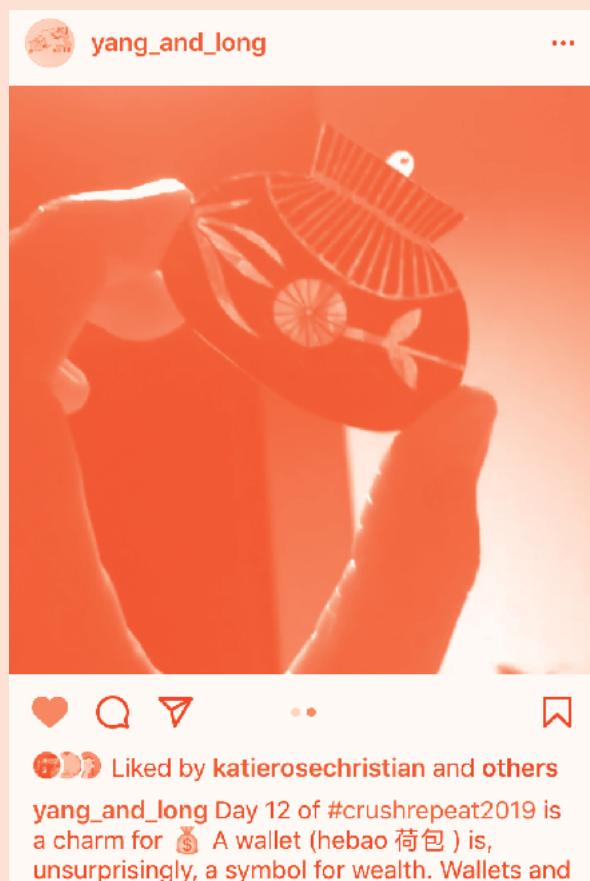
Screenshared image over Zoom containing the instructions for *Composition 2: Hug*.



2.2.3



Process posts on @yang\_and\_long, the shared Instagram account where Chloe Huber and I posted our lucky jewelry prototypes for each other to see.



A full gallery of people perform cross-country embraces.  
From top left: Ryan Diaz, Arabella Bautista, Katherine Wong, Nicci Yin, Nicole Ramirez, Kelsey Cole, Misha Seibel, Monica Docusin, Nadine Tabing, and me.

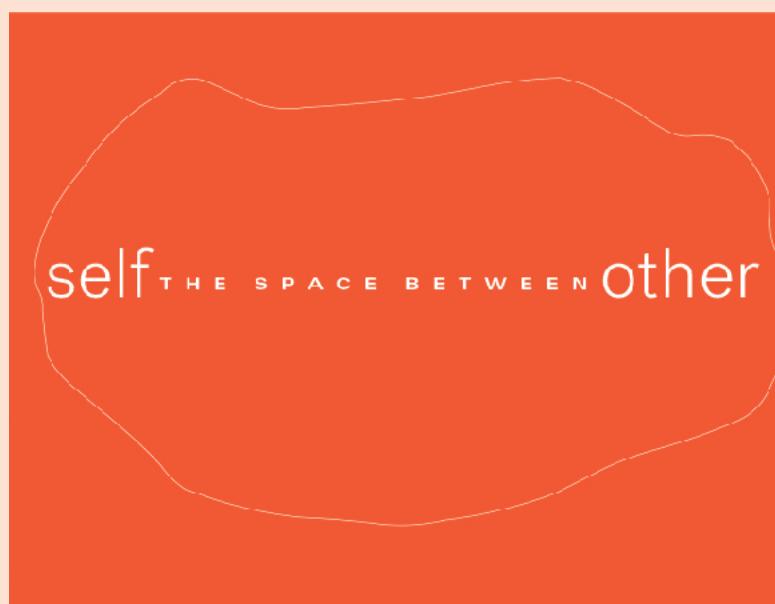
was a collaboration of equals, of inviting in and encouraging the process of understanding each other's points of view.

2.2.3-2.3

### 2.3 COLLABORATION DYNAMICS

Developing a method of working is based on both personal experience as well as learning about other people's processes. Examples such as the collaboration I had with Chloe, which built upon ongoing dialogue and sharing, constitute a relational model that emphasizes process over product. The method of working came naturally in the collaboration with Chloe, which still required us to be flexible with each other's busy schedules and open about our limitations. The naming of this method is cobbled together from my deep curiosity into how other people work. I understand "relational" in the way that is defined by Thick Press, a publishing initiative made up of Erin Segal, a social worker, and Julie Cho, a graphic designer, that creates books about care work. Segal expanded upon the word relational in the context of social work during a presentation about the press. Summarizing

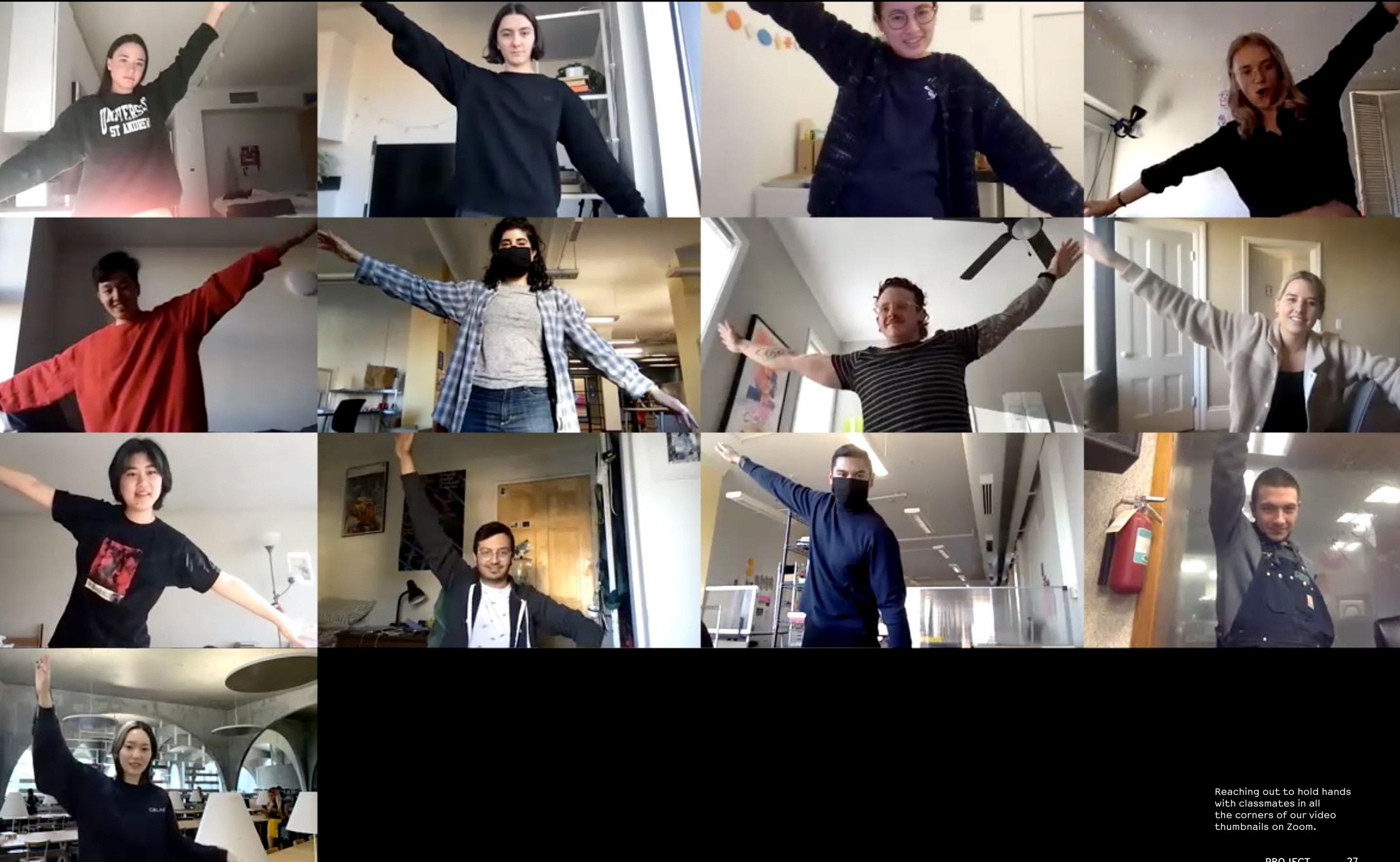
From Thick Press' presentation "On care, vulnerability, and publishing practice": the relational matrix is composed of the self, the other, and the space between.



On screen, a forearm extends from a shoulder that's connected to a torso that turns into another pair of arms to create the letter C. On screen, two bodies turn toward each other and move toward the middle where the video thumbnails touch, leaning forward as if in an embrace. Off screen, there's a feeling of expansion in having to study a partner's movements and seeing more of their living space as they move into their backgrounds to meet you.

Creating these video chat compositions with fellow Zoom call participants got us off our chairs and into our rooms, exploring the edges of our screens while studying each other's thumbnails to find the points where our hands and arms touch. After doing *Composition 3: Connection*, one of the participants expressed a feeling of fondness toward her thumbnail neighbors on screen.

Screenshared image over Zoom containing the instructions for *Composition 3: Connection*.



Reaching out to hold hands  
with classmates in all  
the corners of our video  
thumbnails on Zoom.



From top left: Sasha Karpova, Anastasia Chase, me, Destiny Griesgraber, Ethan Murakami, Forough Abadian, Kelsey Elder, Madi Ko, Nina Yuchi, Romik Bose Mitra, Ryan Diaz, Utkan Dora Oncul, and Vivian Wang.

psychologist Stephen Mitchell, she describes the relationality in her job as a matrix: composed of the social worker (the self) and the client (the other), and the overlapping space in between, creating the structure of a relationship.<sup>1</sup> The matrix is porous, so outside factors, like physical space, spiritual beliefs, habits, roles, and more, seep in. These constructs form individual identities, which also compose the relations between the social worker, client, and overlapping space in between.

As I slowly understand relationality for my own practice, I interpret it to mean that the graphic designer takes on shifting roles in work in relation to collaborators, participants, and audiences. The connective nature of a process characterizes the work. The self and others within a matrix all simultaneously contribute and rely on one another for the collective wellbeing of a process. Anja Grotens, designer and educator, defines collaboration “as a condition [of] acting and reacting at all times, and inhabiting power relations.”<sup>2</sup> The hierarchies

From Thick Press’ presentation “On care, vulnerability, and publishing practice”: The relational matrix composed of two people – the social worker and the client, their space of overlap, and the porous boundaries through which endless outside influences affect the relationship.



2.3

<sup>1</sup> Erin Segal and Julie Cho, “On care, vulnerability, and publishing practice” (presentation, Women’s Center for Creative Work, Los Angeles, CA, December 4, 2019), [http://southland.institute/pdf/thick\\_press/ThickPressXSouthland\\_presentation.pdf](http://southland.institute/pdf/thick_press/ThickPressXSouthland_presentation.pdf).

## PROJECT B AS LUCK WOULD HAVE IT

Two tools for luck: the first, the calendar prompts self-reflection, and the second, the lottery ticket, promises instant fortune. These tools recognize that luck is an intangible feeling and a cultural construction and thus require from their users a generous amount of openness and a bit of superstition. These tools are framed as a set of exercises to consider “luck” in order to make luck.

The calendar, covering seven days, asks a luck seeker to consider what “luck” means to them. What objects and places feel lucky? Is an unplanned encounter serendipitous? At both ends of the seven days, the seeker evaluates their belief in luck as well as their own perceived level of luckiness. Before developing this form, I tested questions on a group of classmates and friends by texting them the daily prompts and asking them to self-assess their sense of luck. How did the acts of noticing and sharing influence them to consider their relationship to luck?

Pages from the calendar. On day 1: “Is there anything lucky amongst your belongings?” On day 3: “Where’s your lucky place? Go there.”



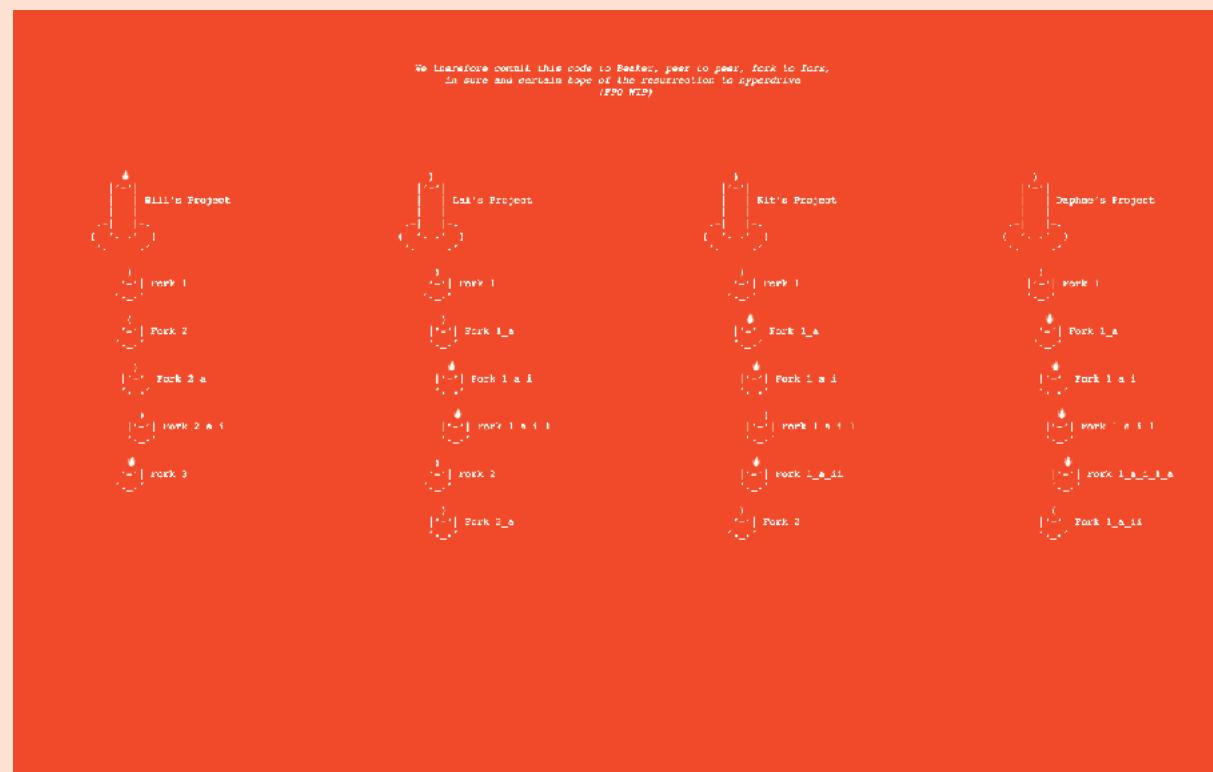
<sup>2</sup> Anja Grotens, "Towards a Critical Collaborative Practice," in *Design Dedication: Adaptive Mentalities in Design Education*, ed. Annelys de Vet (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Valiz, 2020), 40.

between collaborators are constantly negotiated. How can people feel like they are on more equal footing, that their presence and contributions are meaningful?

With the project

*Peer, Peer, Peer, and Peer* → **Project M**, I worked with three classmates, Kit Son Lee, Lai Xu, and Will Mianecki, to build both a curriculum for our Collaborative Study Project and a publishing platform. When we proposed to spend a semester together exploring graphic design for the web, we had no conception of a final outcome. Our work was borne out of hours of conversation about our interests in the internet, privacy, and technological structures. The curriculum we developed had us working in parallel, exploring our own specific interests and skills by developing individual concepts for websites we designed and coded ourselves. We then converged to build some sort of platform to house all our projects, figuring out points of overlap to see what we could make together.

An early sketch of an exquisite corpse-inspired web project, which led to *Peer, Peer, Peer, and Peer*.



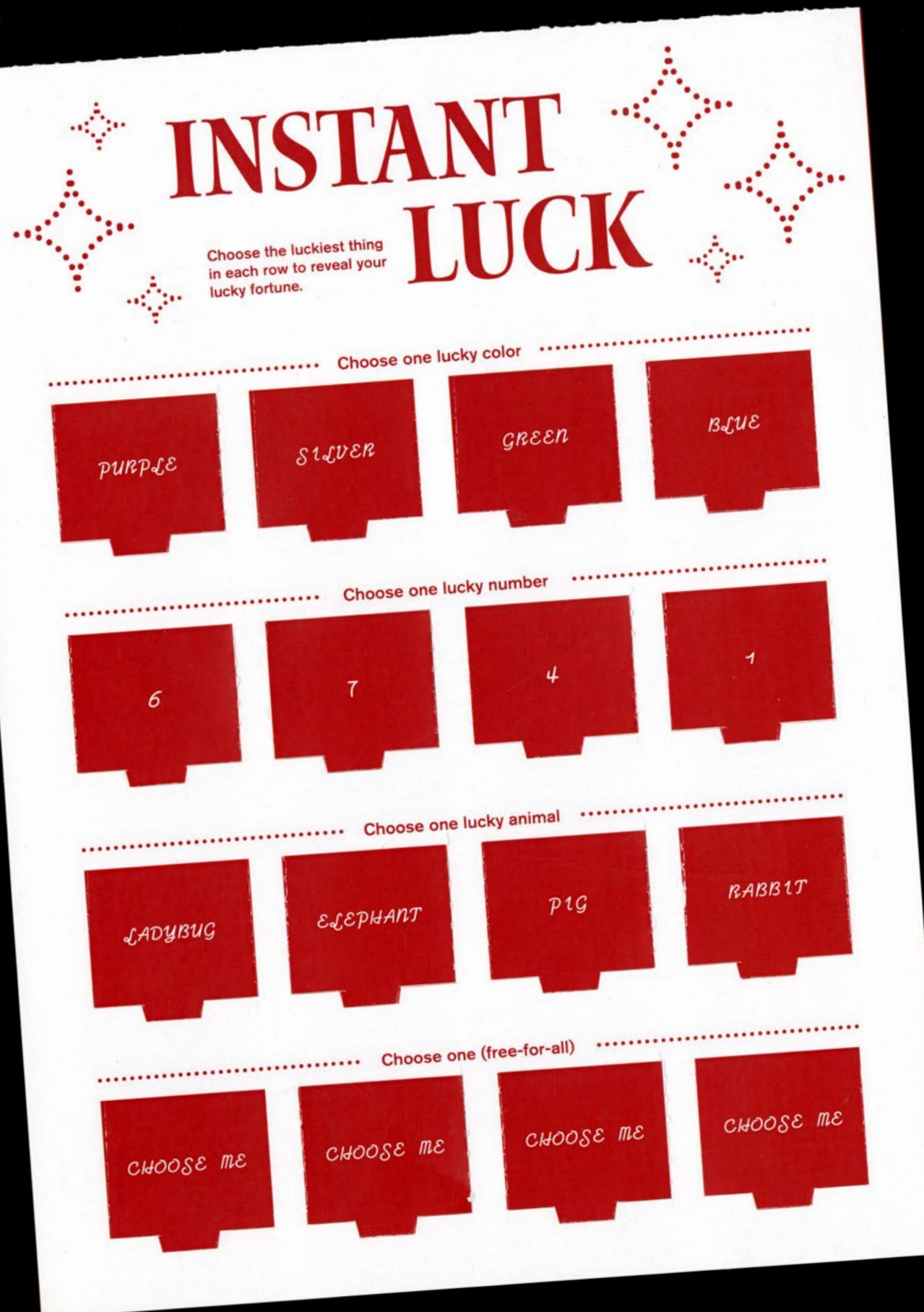
After a week, seven out of 16 participants reported feeling slightly to definitely luckier than usual. Only two people felt unluckier, which coincided with events in their personal lives. The rest felt neutral. Their responses influenced the evaluation system and wording of the questions in the calendar.

The lottery ticket similarly asks a luck seeker to consider what they find lucky. The ticket's fortune builds from a series of answers to a set of prompts: "Choose one lucky color," "Choose one lucky number," "Choose one lucky animal." The resulting fortune promises a set of lucky conditions: "Be open to chance. It's always the season to give. Wear red. You will have abundance." During class, I acted as a fortune teller, reading players' lottery tickets and presenting them with lucky charms.

These exercises don't promise any reward; instead, they depend on the seeker's willingness to play along. Like luck, the interactions with these tools are augmented by the active attention of the seekers to the prompts and by belief.

Georgie Nolan, Caroline Robinson Smith, and Maddie Woods try their luck with the lottery ticket.





Left: Lucky lottery ticket.  
Above: Reading Elena Foraker her lucky fortune based on the answers she chose.

For example, an early idea borrowed from the exquisite corpse method, in which a collective composition is made up of the cumulative contributions by individuals. Rather than a composition, we shared our website code for someone else in the group to extend or remix. This was a way to test the limits of authorship as well as learn from one another's work (especially important we all had different levels of coding ability). We developed a trust in one another's capabilities, including ones outside of code and design, such as communication, note-taking, and resource-finding. This is to say that collaborations build iteratively outward from a place of connection, sharing, and reciprocity.

How do these dynamics extend to working with audiences and participants? Further, how can designers not only encourage an experience or participation, but also foster connections and commitments between individuals within an audience?

#### 2.4 COLLABORATION AS EXPERIENCE

The word relational exists in art and design history more generally, used as a way to categorize and describe work and objects that stem from observations of human interaction, shifting the term from focusing process over to an outcome. Relational art as a phrase is attributed to curator Nicolas Bourriaud, who defines this type of work in his 1998 book as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context."<sup>1</sup>

Simply put, the art piece consists of the interactions between audience members as mediated by an art object. In practice, this usually occurs as an observable social circumstance within a gallery context. An often-cited example of relational art is artist Rirkrit Tiravanija's 1992 work *untitled (free/still)*, in which a gallery was turned into a kitchen.<sup>2</sup> Tiravanija moved

<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Bourriard, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, (Dijon: Les presses du reel, 2002), 113.

<sup>2</sup> "What is Relational Aesthetics? Here's How Hanging Out, Eating Dinner, and Feeling Awkward Became Art," *Artspace*, September 8, 2016, [https://www.artspace.com/magazine/art\\_101/book\\_report/what-is-relational-aesthetics-54164](https://www.artspace.com/magazine/art_101/book_report/what-is-relational-aesthetics-54164).

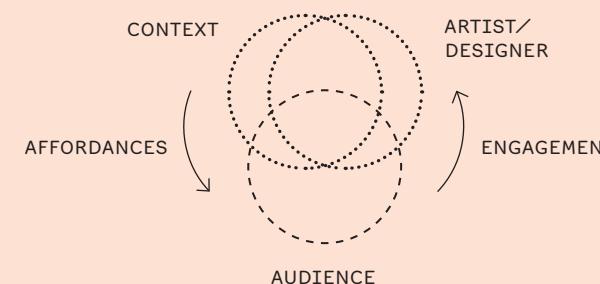


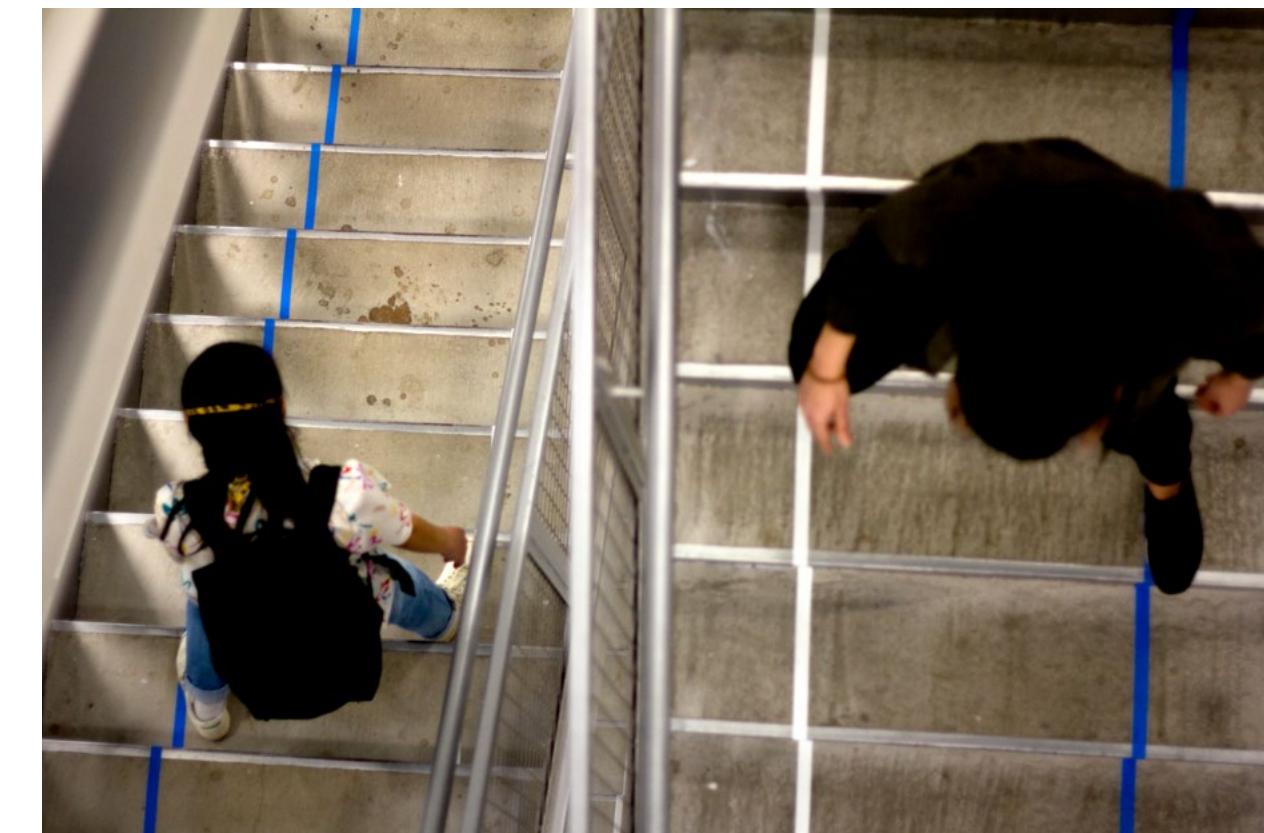
FIG. 9 – RELATIONAL ART/DESIGN DYNAMICS

#### PROJECT C STAIRWELL GAMES

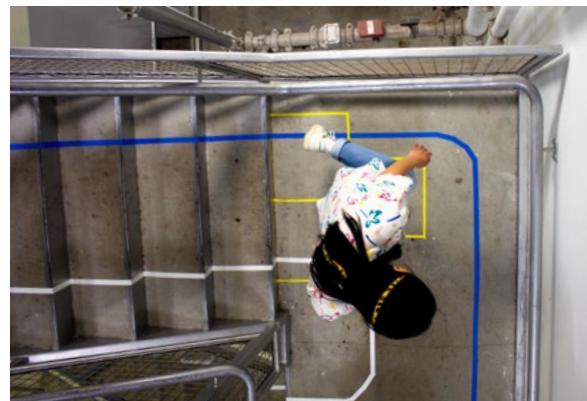
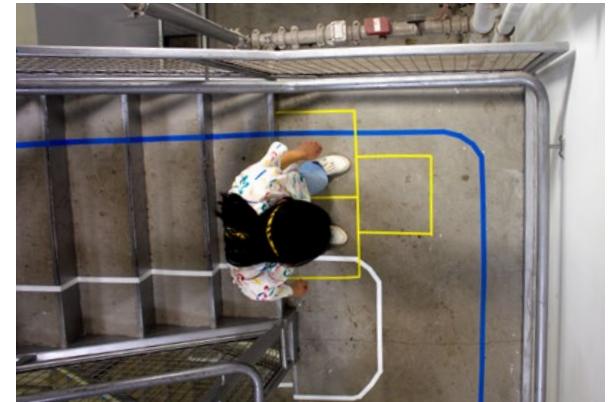
The stairwell of the CIT building is one of the few common areas that graduate students regularly share. White, blue, green, yellow, and red tape intervene in the space, transforming six flights of stairs with suggestions of playground and sports field markings. Usually a space to pass through, the stairwell is transformed into a site of play.

The shapes made by the tape encourage certain interactions: a miniature field can be used for a quick game of soccer; a formation of squares looks like hopscotch. The lack of prescribed rules within the space leaves play up to the imagination. The blue and white tape that travels from the sixth floor to the first can either be a race track, rails for the feet that alter walking patterns, or a runway. The tape acts as a visual script for interaction. Shapes are purposefully doubled so that more people can join in.

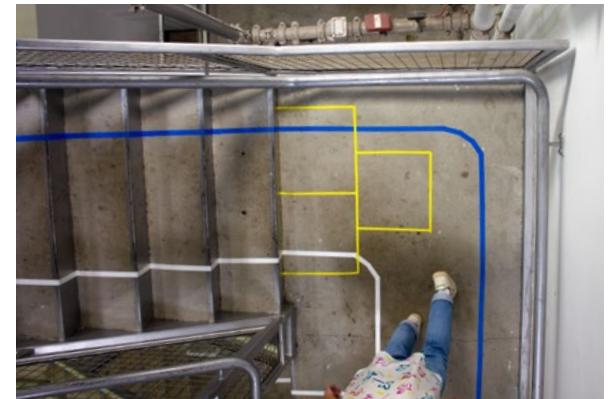
Racing Forough Abadian down the stairs along the tape track. Photos by Romik Bose Mitra.



Rirkrit Tiravanija, *untitled (free/still)*, installation view in 303 Gallery, 1992



Hopscotch squares start at the top of one flight of stairs and continue at the next landing.



The work was the collective dining experience. The location in the gallery and the meal facilitate opportunities for exchange.

In dealing with visual communication meant to reach and compel particular audiences, graphic designers take into account human relations and their contexts. Work that is open to the specificities and idiosyncrasies of people's behaviors in interacting with objects was described by Andrew Blauvelt in 2008 as relational design. He proposes a framework of thinking that is "preoccupied with design's effects.... concerned with performance or use, not as the natural result of some intended functionality but in the realm of behavior and uncontrollable consequences... It explores more open-ended processes that value the experiential and the participatory..."<sup>3</sup> The growth of consumer technology and increasing use of the internet, which afford new forms of connectivity and interactivity, serve as the backdrop for this way of thinking about design. The Roomba, he writes, is an example of a movement toward relational design.<sup>4</sup> Previous vacuum cleaner designs were

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Blauvelt, "Towards Relational Design," *The Gradient*, Walker Art Center, November 10, 2008, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/towards-relational-design>.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Blauvelt, "Towards Relational Design," *Design Observer*, November 3, 2008, <https://designobserver.com/feature/towards-relational-design/7557/>.

more concerned with form (the Dirt Devil Kone, a shiny conical vacuum that can be put on display in a room) or function (the Dyson with the ball pivot, indicating its high-tech ability to reach any part of the floor). With a set of sensors, the Roomba responds to the shape of any room, motoring around table legs and stopping on ledges. A user can program the Roomba to take specific routes around the house. It's adaptable to a room and to individual needs.

Relational in this realm has more to do with looking at design in its context of use and the potential ability for customization based on a set of rules. Relational design embraces these rules or constraints – like a floor plan a Roomba can travel – "as a way of countering the excessive subjectivity of most design decision-making, passing this subjectivity off to those participating in this work."<sup>5</sup> This idea is explored through conditional design, a method formulated by Luna Maurer, Edo Paulus, Jonathan Puckey, and Rowel Wouters. Their work together centers around a process dictated by a set of logic. The logic consists of rules and conditions used to simulate collaboration between participants. The outcome

Examples of the movement toward relational design according to Blauvelt, from the Dirt Devil Kone (form), Dyson ball pivot (function), to Roomba (context).



## PROJECT D PROVIDENCE RIVER SCAVENGER HUNT

Inspired by my walks by the Providence River, I sewed two booklets together with scavenger hunt prompts that encourage players to pay close attention to their surroundings and each other. Nearly every day since RISD first shut down, I take a walk by the Providence River. I start from the Crawford Street Bridge and walk along the east side, past the steps where people feed the waterfowl, and across the Pedestrian Bridge. What separates the walk from routine (habitual, automatic) toward ritual (intentional, sacred) is my "presentness" and engagement with sensory input: I notice the signs on the trees and in the ground of the changing seasons, the muddy stench of the river mixing with smell of food cooking from nearby restaurants, the sounds of the ducks quacking and flapping their wings occasionally covered up by revving motorcycle engines.

The scavenger hunt is a game played by two people walking and working together. The questions are housed in two separate booklets, bound together

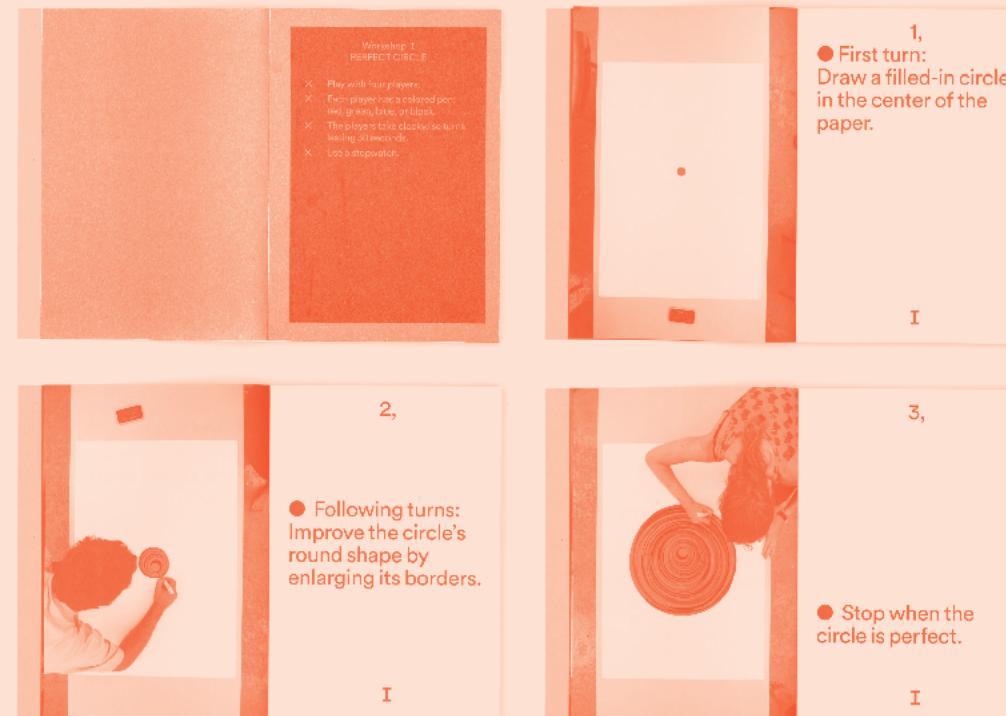
Partners Forough Abadian and Ryan Diaz point things out to each other along the Providence River. Photo by Romik Bose Mitra.



of these collaborations are visual expressions of behavior as interpreted by participating individuals. The *Conditional Design Workbook*, for example, offers scripts for drawing activities to be done by a group of people. A simple workshop prompts participants to add rings of circles onto an initial drawing of a circle, stopping "when the circle is perfect."<sup>6</sup> The rules are straightforward, but open to interpretation by the group, which is then visualized by their collective drawing. The script creates a common starting point for participants to act out.

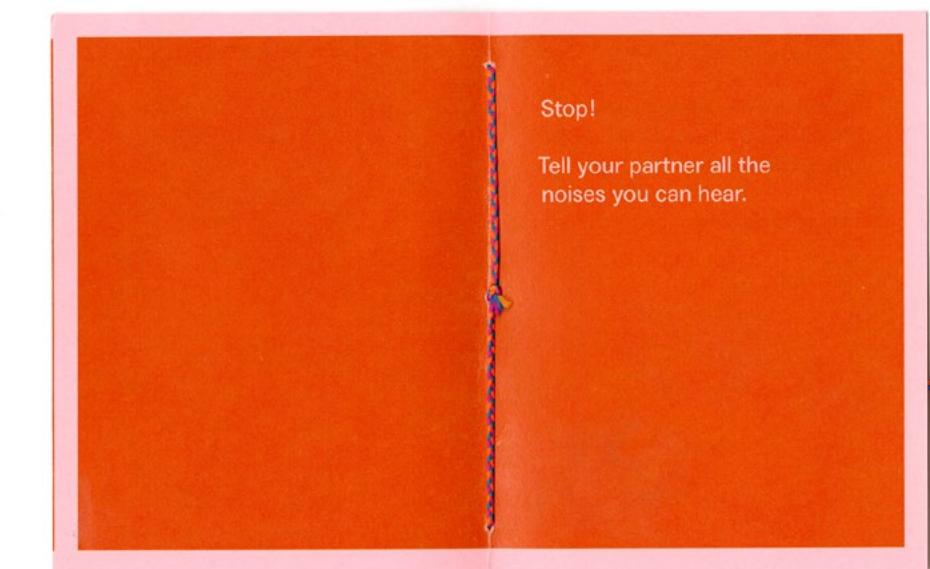
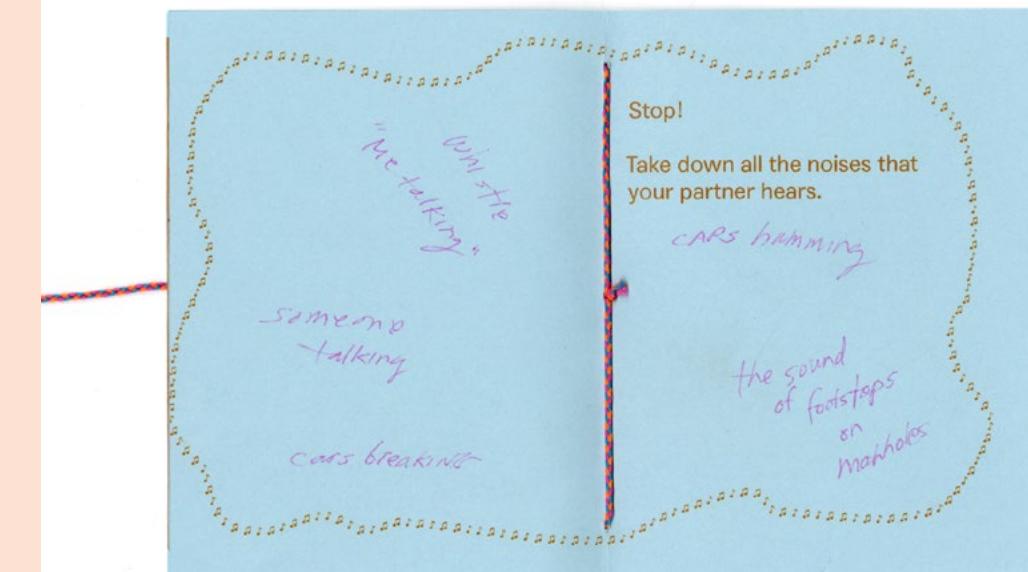
Relational art and relational/conditional design depart from the conception of relationality previously described, which is a way of understanding collaboration in a creative process. Instead, these terms describe processes and outcomes that use human behavior and context as source material. Still, both relational art and design provide a useful backdrop to think through the actual experiences of the people interfacing with a piece and their relationship to the artist/designer. What role do the audiences play beyond completing the work? Does the work play a role in their lives?

Spreads from the *Conditional Design Workbook* detailing the steps for collaboratively drawing the perfect circle.



by colorful braided string six feet long so the players walk alongside each other at an enforced social distance. On a busy sidewalk, the partners would have to negotiate other pedestrians.

One page in one book will prompt, "Stop! Tell your partner all the noises you can hear." The partner's book on the same page reads, "Stop! Take down all the noises that your partner hears." One partner does the noticing, while the other takes it all down. Then they switch roles with the next prompt, sharing back-and-forth.



Forough and Ryan's responses to the prompt "Take down all the noises that your partner hears" include "cars humming" and "me talking."

Forough and Ryan using their legs as tables to jot down their observations.  
Photo by Romik Bose Mitra.



Kelsey Elder and Destiny Griesgraber peer into a planter of budding daffodils.  
Photo by Madi Ko.



Does their engagement either with each other or the creator extend beyond enacting the script for the work? Should audiences be compensated for their participation? Are they co-authors? What responsibilities does the creator have toward an audience?

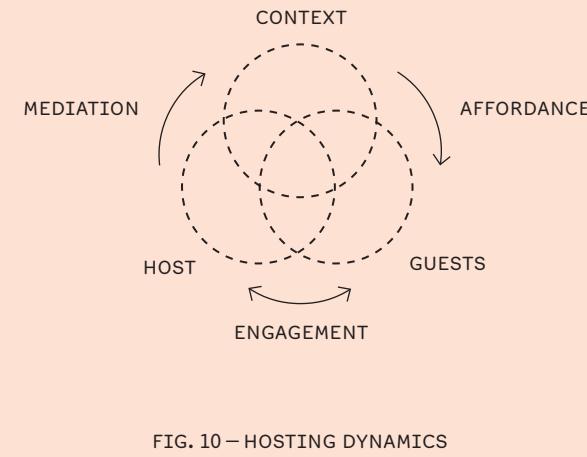
**2.4 – 2.5**

## 2.5 DESIGNER AS HOST

In reference to the direct engagements graphic designers can have with audiences, Groten puts forth the idea of the “designer host.” Designer hosts organize lectures and dinners as spaces to exchange ideas, or put on workshops or start radio shows. Although these activities don’t resemble traditional graphic design artifacts, Groten argues that they contribute to understanding the interpersonal aspects of a design practice. “How do you, as a designer, citizen, and student host relations? How do you receive and treat guests? How do you engage them in dialogues? How do you draw commonalities and differences?”<sup>1</sup> The designer host must

<sup>1</sup> Groten, 43. determine how to invite guests, how to welcome and attend to them. The designer host sets the scene for engagement, through theme or tone or décor. The designer host introduces guests to each other, encouraging discussion. There’s space for connection as well as disagreement. The designer host’s role and involvement can shift – for instance, as guests start directing festivities or form a sub-party. Then, the host merely provides the space and resources. Different types of gatherings provide different metaphors for the ways audiences engage with work. At a gala, for example, attendees may be more passive, there to enact certain social codes and be entertained. Dinner party guests, on the other hand, may engage in livelier debate and discussion. At a parade, some audiences help create, organize, and perform while others spectate.

Groten goes on to bring up the host’s role in relation to guests. “How does a designer address an audience? As viewers or users, or as potential allies, or as adversaries with whom you need to go into discussion and argue?”<sup>2</sup> The relational model of collabora- <sup>2</sup> Groten, 46. tion provides a way of thinking about audiences as autonomous beings bringing certain understandings and social codes to an experience. The parallel of a relational process to an experience engaging audiences resembles a potluck, with guests taking the role of “potential allies.” Reciprocity is inherent in a potluck. The



## PROJECT E PROPAGANDA GAME

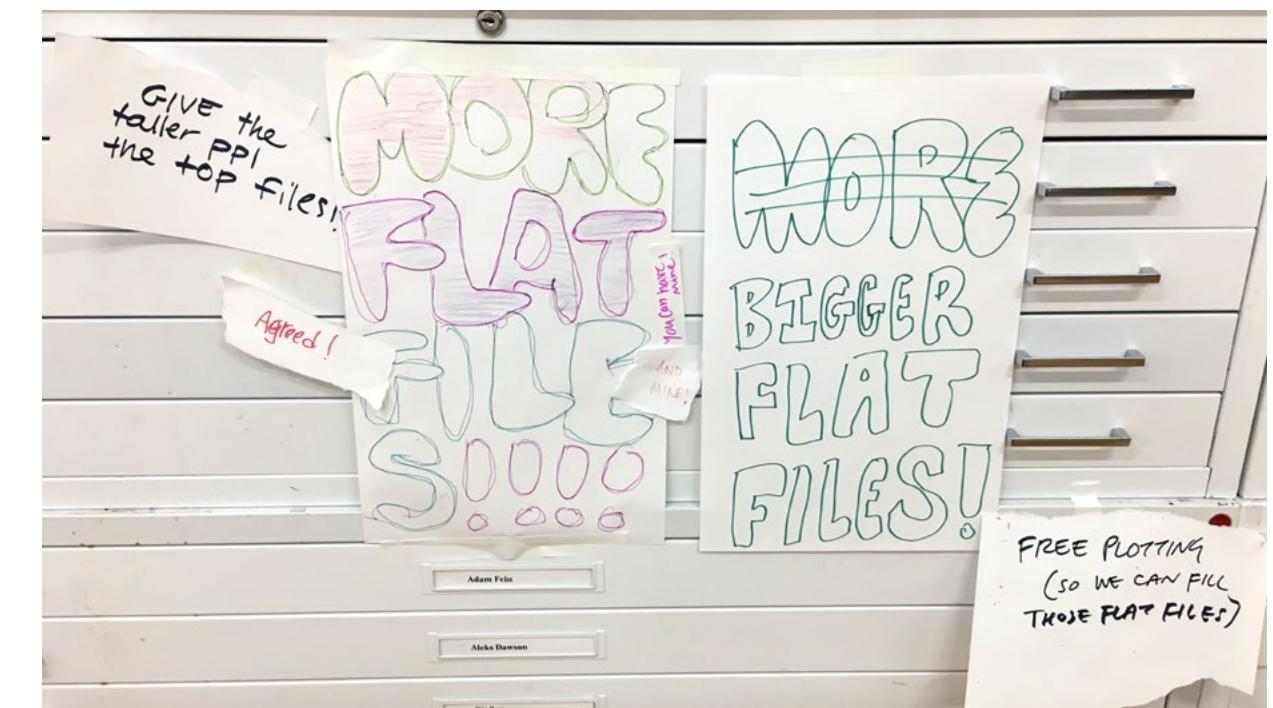
“We all have the potential to bewilder, humor, provoke, inspire, and convince others with concise and measured moves. Propaganda is a strategic device utilizing this strength of concept with relatively little resources, making it a powerful tool in service of even the most marginalized positions.”

— Melissa J. Frost<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Melissa J. Frost, “Collegia of Propaganda: Session 1/2,” (presentation, Free School of Architecture, Los Angeles, CA, 2018), <https://www.are.na/block/2362470>.

What stories do propaganda tell? What does propaganda hide? In two workshops, I asked my classmates to come up with a position meaningful to them about our shared space. “What do you want to stimulate others to think? To do? What idea do you urgently want to give voice to?” In the first workshop, “space” was broadly defined as anywhere relevant to the propagandist; in the second, the scope narrowed to the graduate graphic design studio. Then, I prompted them to quickly make a persuasive poster with their message using the tabloid paper, markers, and tape provided.

One student advocated for “MORE FLAT FILES!!!!” and several classmates agreed.



2.5

hierarchy between host and guests is lessened. A host provides a space, and guests bring food or drinks or silverware to share with everyone else. There's enough food for everyone to take a little bit of everything. Through this sharing, guests make a commitment to each other that all will be fed.

In considering my role in relation to an audience and in my work that invites participation, this means that I must take on certain responsibilities to encourage connection and trust. First, to set up expectations for the audience ahead of an experience in the invitation, making space for consent. To afford participation and set up systems in which audiences know their contribution will be valued; perhaps their contributions will affect each other, reconfiguring the relationships among participants themselves. To encourage conversation and collaboration among the audience. To create space for moments of care and attention. To consider the effects of the engagement.

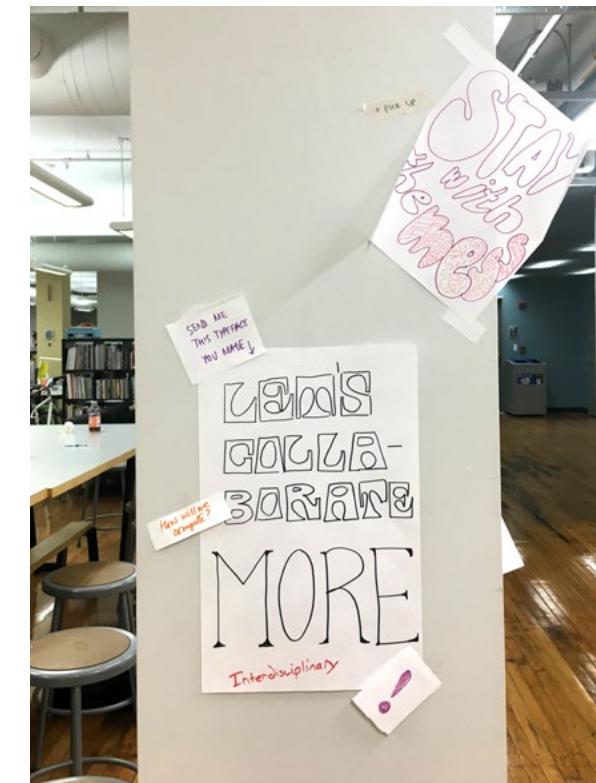
Potluck of dishes, drinks, elements, and feelings drawn by grad students on Zoom. Georgie Nolan and I worked on the posters and Zoom graphics for Grad X, an event for graduate students to gather and share their work.



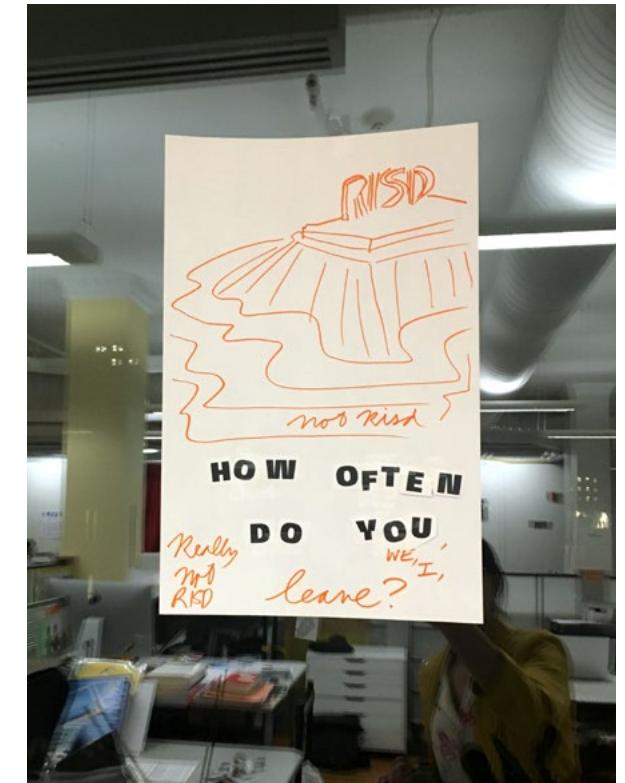
What *food pairing* did you bring to the *virtual potluck*?

After the propagandists hung their posters up somewhere in the studio, they then went around to read one another's messages, adding responses expressing agreement, critique, or engaging in a conversation. Perhaps because of the brief time allotted to brainstorm and design, or because of the way I framed the workshop, many of the resulting posters from the workshop resembled public service announcements more than propaganda. Messages ranged from "USE LESS PAPER" taped next to the Xerox printer to "How often do you leave?" with RISD drawn chapel-on-the-hill style. Still, the posters put into language and form different opinions about our shared studio space, broadcasting them to all who pass through.

"Let's Collaborate More" posted on a pillar by the common table is met with "Interdisciplinary," "How will we compete?" "Send me this typeface you made," and "!"



"How often do you, we, I, leave?" from RISD drawn up on a hill to "not RISD" and "really not RISD," posted on a window.



## 2.6.1 COLLABORATING WITH AUDIENCES

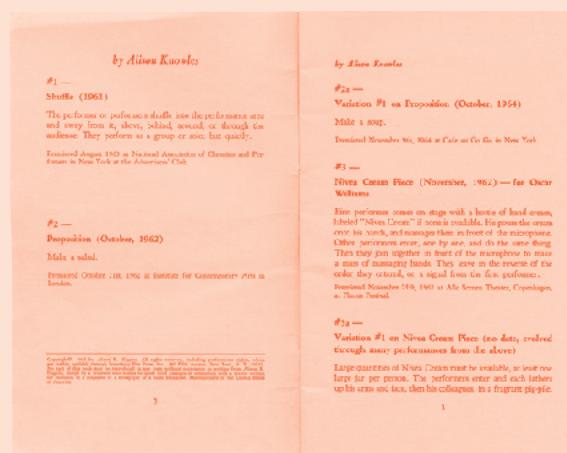
2.6.1

In my graduate work, I invited the participation of my classmates and friends in order to visualize relationships between people and to extend spaces of overlap. Defining scripts for play and offering instructions for behavior set a common stage for interaction and exchange through Zoom and in physical space.

Conditional design prompts offer scripts and instructions as an invitation for engagement. These prompts share similarities to the Fluxus scores from the 1960s. Usually in the form of language or text, the scores act as music compositions for the artist and audience performed. Often, these scores prompted different ways of experiencing a shared space or each other. For example, Alison Knowles' *Proposition (Make A Salad)* from 1962 simply reads, "Make a salad." In staging the piece, the players become attuned to the sounds of washing, chopping, and slicing vegetables and mixing dressing. The sensations around an ordinary task become heightened.<sup>1</sup> Because conditional design prompts and Fluxus scores are often

<sup>1</sup> Danielle Johnson, "Artist Instructions," Museum of Modern Art, August 26, 2020, <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/407>.

Alison Knowles, *By Alison Knowles. A Great Bear Pamphlet*, 1965 (right). The spread makes reference to *Proposition #2*, which was performed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (left).



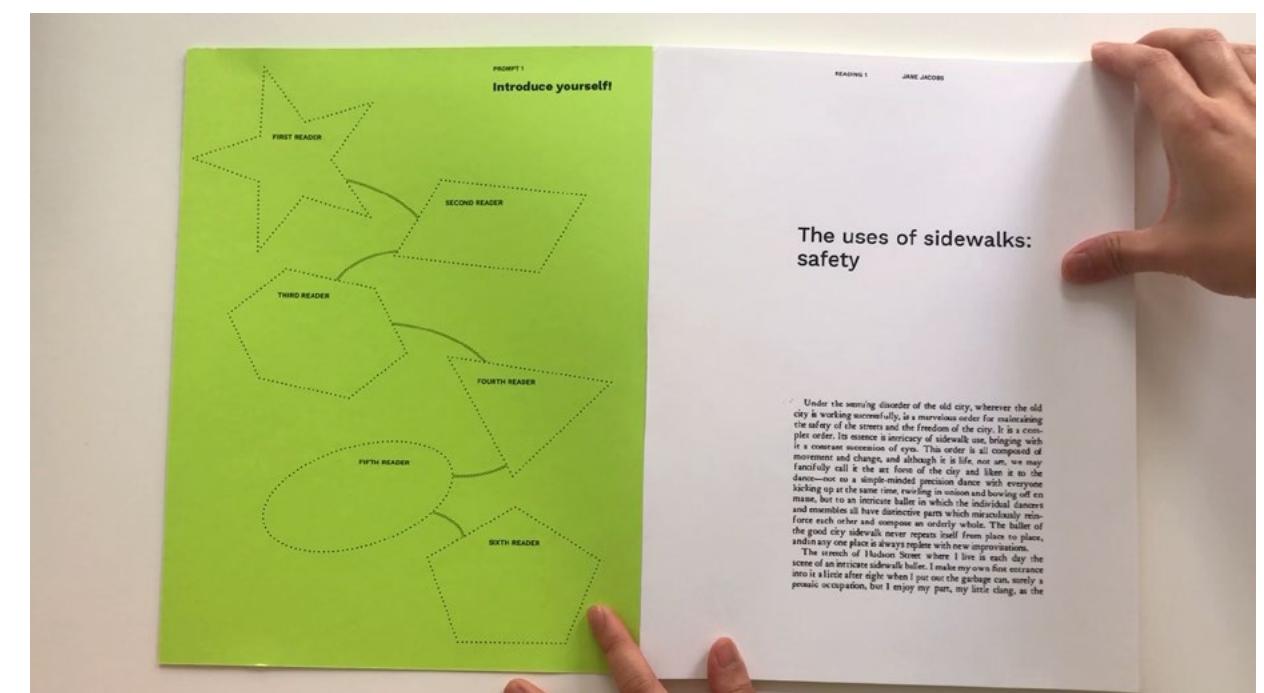
## PROJECT F A BOOK THAT GROWS: COMMUNITY READER

This reader collects together texts about building community and forms of neighborhood safety that reject the institution of policing (see more books from the series, *A Book That Grows* → Project L).

The pages of the reader fold out like an accordion, connecting each text to each other. The second page lays out the circulatory nature of the workbook: it's meant to be passed around by six readers who feel safe with each other. Page margins provide space for the texts to be annotated. Occasional questions prompt reflection. When the sixth reader finishes up, they send it back to the fifth person, so the conversation can keep building.

The reader opens with a meditation from Jane Jacobs' *The Life and Death of American Cities* on the safety in knowing your neighbors on a lively city block. Jia Toletino's "Can I Help You?" explores mutual aid support and Hannah Black's "Go Outside" underscores the importance of being out in public, where social life is. Finally, Rebel Sidney Black's "Pod Mapping for Mutual Aid" encourages readers to consider their own networks of safety.

The two pages from the *Community Reader* (still from a video of the book).



The uses of sidewalks:  
safety

PROMPT 2, PART B

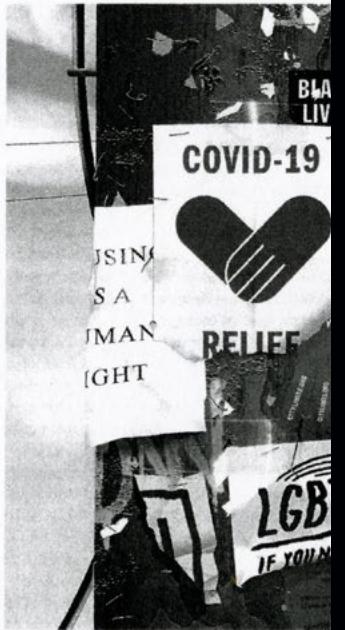
**Ideally, what would you like your neighborhood to mean to you, if there's a difference?**

READING 2

CAN I HELP?

*The meaning of mutual aid during COVID-19*

By Jia Tolentino



We are not accustomed to destruction looking, at first, like emptiness. The coronavirus pandemic is disorienting in part because it defies our normal cause-and-effect shortcuts to understanding the world. The source of danger is invisible; the most effective solution involves willing paralysis; we won't know the consequences of today's actions until two weeks have passed. Everything circles a bewildering paradox: other people are both a threat and a lifeline. Physical connection could kill us, but civic connection is the only way to survive.

In March, even before widespread workplace closures and self-isolation,

people there established the new normals. In Aurora, color-coded protocols for the school. Disorganized large collections of people started to help. Black, Inc., and the broader grads had been off from

Organizers hope that, after the coronavirus, we'll

**PROMPT 1: Introduce yourself**

**PROMPT 2: What does your neighborhood mean to you?**

**READING 1: The uses of sidewalks**

**READING 2: Go outside**

**WRITING: Pad mapping**

**PROMPT 1: Introduce yourself**

**PROMPT 2: What does your neighborhood mean to you?**

**READING 1: The uses of sidewalks**

**READING 2: Go outside**

**WRITING: Pad mapping**

Left: two pages taped together.  
Above: the full accordion.

written down, they can be published and cataloged and then performed by participants without the designer or artist present.

I use scripts and instructions to set a common stage for open interpretation and interaction. *Video Chat Composition 2: Hug* reads: "At least two people / Gallery view / Hug each other through the sides of your video thumbnails. A digital embrace. / Embrace for as long as you want" → [Project A](#). Four short phrases set up a starting point for interaction. Not all scripts need to be in text form; symbols and graphics can also suggest certain behaviors, as with the playground markings in *Stairwell Games* → [Project C](#). Playful collaborations are initiated in interpreting the scripts alongside others.

### 2.6.2 TURNING ATTENTION OUTWARD

Sister Joan: You clearly love Sacramento.  
 Lady Bird: I do?  
 Sister Joan: You write about Sacramento so affectionately and with such care.  
 Lady Bird: Well, I was just describing it.  
 Sister Joan: Well, it comes across as love.  
 Lady Bird: Sure. I guess I pay attention.  
 Sister Joan: Don't you think maybe they are the same thing? Love and attention?<sup>1</sup>

Sister Joan and Lady Bird discussing love and attention in *Lady Bird*.



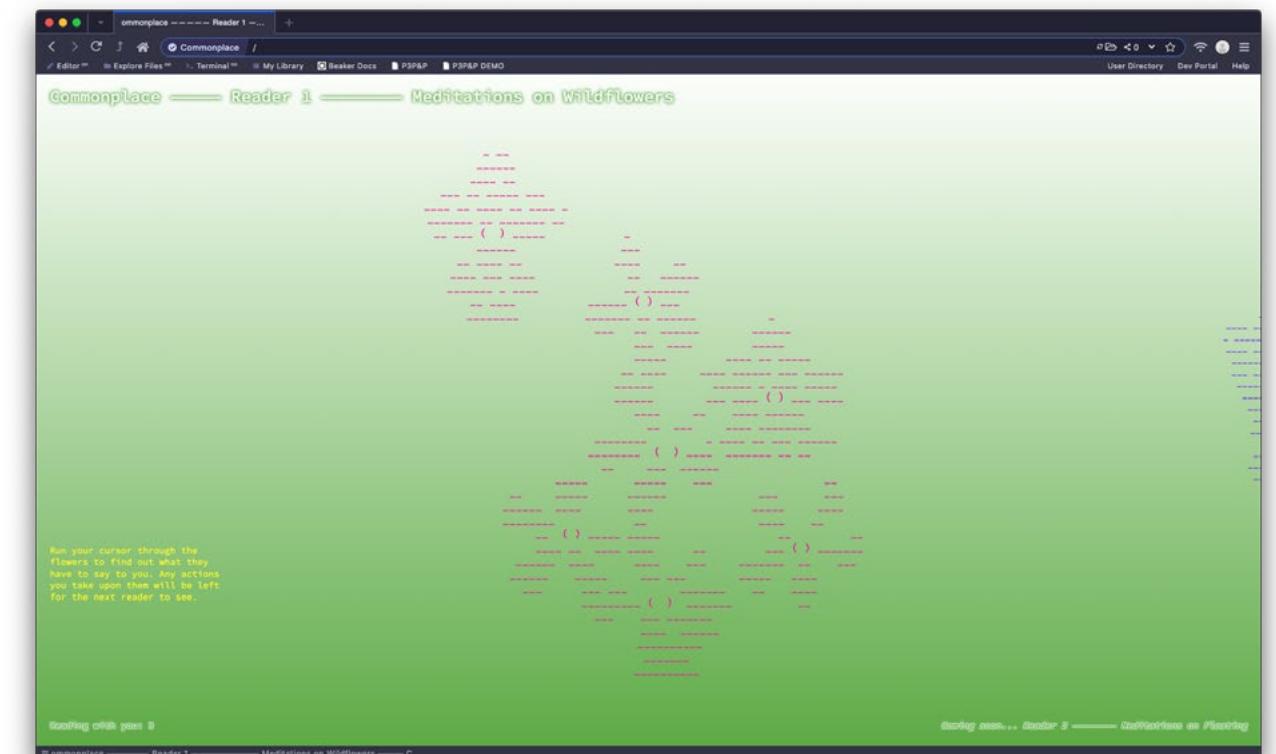
### PROJECT G COMMONPLACE

- a. A shared reading experience on the internet
- b. Themed collections as offerings
- c. Texts sequenced together like a mixtape

*Commonplace* began as *A Book That Grows*, a series of print readers that treat the book as a democratic object and shareable form → [Project L](#). In printed form, the readers look completely different from each other as objects unto themselves. The idea of putting these readers onto the internet initially came about as a way to bring them all together. As books meant to be reproducible by anyone with a printer, the reader files can be hosted on the internet to download, print, and share.

Because each physical reader is meant to be encountered in organic and unexpected ways—shared between two people, mailed as a gift, found in a public space—the website form should similarly be relational and variable. It exists conditionally on the peer-to-peer web, where the idea of a shared reading experience is inherent.

A field of ASCII flowers.



Just as shared scripts provide a common starting point for collaboration and play, so too do the places that participants share. As Sister Joan suggests, attention paid to a place may inspire care, affection, even love. As a newcomer to Providence, I tried connecting to the city and with RISD through observation. This ritual is captured and shared through *Providence River Scavenger Hunt*, in which pairs of participants take a walk and point things out to each other →[Project D](#). *Propaganda Game* focuses attention on a specific shared space: the graduate graphic design studio →[Project E](#). These projects use prompts and mediated experiences to draw participants' attention to their surroundings as well as to each others' experiences with place, bringing different viewpoints into conversation.

<sup>1</sup> *Lady Bird*, directed by Greta Gerwig (A24, 2017), 1:06:00 to 1:06:37, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80205227>.

The current iteration of *Commonplace* — *Reader 1 — Meditations on Wildflowers* explores growth, reciprocity, decay, and memory through a field of ASCII flowers on screen. In digital and physical forms (*Garden Reader* →[Project L](#)), readers interact with the text, either revealing or transforming the contents through click and touch. For all versions of *Commonplace*, the presence and actions of readers on the site is noted, whether through a number counter, record of interactions that change the reading experience, or textual contributions.

### 2.6.3 RECIPROCITY

To attend a potluck is to consent to a set of agreements around reciprocity. *I will bring a dish to share as part of a larger meal, and I anticipate sharing in others' food as well.* Can design objects similarly encourage mutuality, in which one's actions benefits or affects another's experience? Focusing in on the book as an artifact, how can a publication grow in collective knowledge? How does a book circulate; who does it reach? How do readers leave traces behind for each other? I explore all these questions through the creation of social reading experiences, as in *Community Reader* →[Project F](#) and *Commonplace* →[Project G](#).

Hover over the flowers to reveal text. Click on the text to expand that line. Click again to restore the flower to its original state.



Commonplace — Reader 1 — Meditations on Wildflowers

was done, the plants would  
send out . slender  
red runners . + . to make  
new plants... .  
weed out little patches  
of bare ground where

even more plants, ready  
to bloom under the next  
Strawberry Moon.

safe  
he garden  
I am in the kind  
of company that allows me  
to be alone and

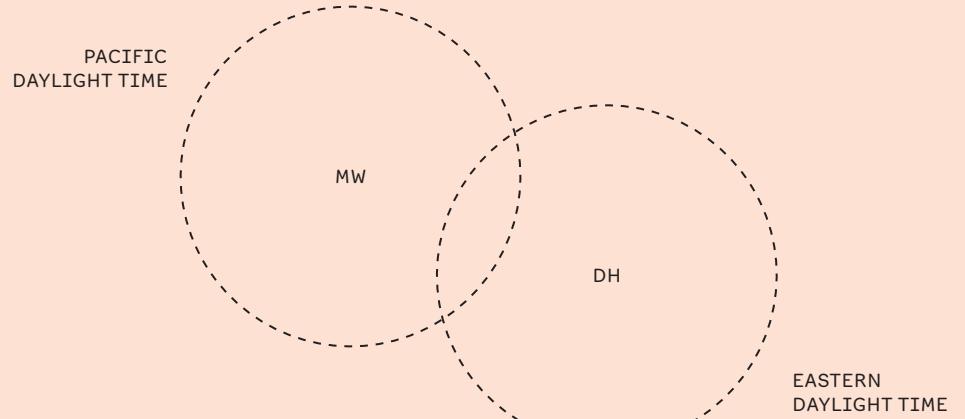
Want to add more flowers to the  
field? [Send](#) a piece of text and a  
type of flower.

Reading with you: 3

Coming soon... Reader 2 — Meditations on Floating

r 1 — Meditations on Wildflowers — Commonplace — Reader

Scroll sideways to see more flowers. At the end, I call  
for contributions for more quotes and flowers.



I learned about Mary Welcome's work through Jayme Yen ([→ Interview 3](#)), who shared with me an article that Welcome co-wrote with fellow artist Ashley Hanson about the practice of neighboring.<sup>1</sup> As traveling artists working in rural places, Welcome and Hanson discuss the methodology they've developed for entering new communities: one that involves mutually beneficial exchange through building relationships, spending time in town, and looking after one another—the traits of a good neighbor.

Welcome and I talked over Zoom in April, her in Palouse, Washington and me in Providence, Rhode Island. Over a year before, Washington State first issued a state-wide stay-at-home order in response to the spread of COVID-19. As an artist whose practice is rooted in community engagement throughout rural America, Welcome had to reconfigure her practice indefinitely. During our conversation, we talked about some of the ways she reoriented her work, the importance of compensating labor, and the role of potlucks in building bridges.

<sup>1</sup> Ashley Hanson and Mary Welcome, "We Are All We Have: The Practice of Neighboring," *Mn Artists*, July 18, 2018, <https://mnartists.walkerart.org/we-are-all-we-have-the-practice-of-neighboring>.

## DAPHNE HSU

Could we start with what you're working on right now, or what you've recently wrapped up? Basically, what's top of mind for you?

## MARY WELCOME

Well, it's a crazy time in terms of being an artist, as I'm sure you can imagine—I'm sure everybody talks about [that] all the time. I think what's been so interesting about interviews and conversations this year are questions that used to have these answers don't really have answers. We're developing new systems of safety and relationships. In that way it's been a really hard year for me, whose work relies on an almost entirely analog sense of gathering, and a very vernacular form of gathering, working with spaces that already exist as places of connection in communities. It's been really strange to navigate how to continue to do my work as an artist and an activist and organizer but without any of the platforms that used to exist for getting people together to discuss solutions and have transformative exchanges.

At first, I was just willing to wait it out, but I don't think there's any such thing as waiting it out anymore. I also got bored with waiting about three months in. I was like, *Okay, what can I do?* So at the home base level, here in my community, it's just been a lot of basic relief work and access to resources and using my skill set as someone that works in creative community engagement, but to pivot that towards emergency preparedness and working with the community through an emergency.

But on the creative side I've gotten an opportunity to do a few things. I just finished doing a project with a collaborator [Aislinn Pentecost-Farren] in Bridesburg, which is a neighborhood in Philadelphia where my collaborator has been working with this community for two to three years. [She] has been hired to do a lot of social engagement and community work and social practice work as an artist with a specific neighborhood about their relationship to the river and the idea of a new green space that was an opportunity. That's a lot about land use and climate and generational relationships to this land, which is a highly industrialized neighborhood. When the pandemic happened, her last year of this residency halted, but she still had all this social engagement that's part of the project. She called me and I got to work with her on that: how do we engage a community when we can't get together, when we technically both rely on going to houses and churches and bars for conversational research?

What can we do to bring a community together, and what can we do within a community when there's no safe spaces together?

What we ended up doing was: I spent a lot of time walking around on Google Maps getting to know the layout of a neighborhood, which is really weird. I've never tried to work totally remotely with a community before. She was able to do a lot of the phone interviews with elders and other community leaders just because she had a working relationship with the community. Our project ended up taking place within a pizza box. We realized that the only safe way to get in and out of people's houses, really, was through takeout food and delivery food. We partnered with the local pizza joint and designed this pizza box that matched the neighborhood vernacular city language—but was about this relationship to the river, and about a future relationship to the river—and stocked this pizzeria with this large box. Anybody that's ordering a large pizza, which is typically a family, or a group of people, were getting their pizza in this really wacky art box. It was full of spaces to interact, like drawings, puzzles, quizzes kind of stuff, but also a lot of very esoteric information specific to that [part of the] city.

I feel like that was the pinnacle of "pandemic art project," where you're like, *Where is the space? How can we be really creative about entering homes and stewarding conversations without being there?*, but still contributing to the local economy and working with local stakeholders. That project just wrapped up maybe two months ago. The pizza boxes went live in December. I think there were like 5,000 of them. I don't know if they're still sending them out, but I felt like that was a project that I actually was able to be creative and be working in the way I want to without creating these voids for Zoom fatigue, et cetera.

## DH

For something like that—and for your other projects that are longer term engagements—have you received feedback on that? How do you support a longer-term exchange?

## MW

I was really only working on [the pizza box project for] eight months of it. My friend that lives and works in Philadelphia has an extended relationship with this community. I need to check in with her because I'm really excited about any feedback. We talked to the pizza joint in the first few months and they're like, "People love

INTERVIEW 1

it, it's so surprising for someone to get something so different."

I think we'll really be able to measure impact once it's safe enough for the community to begin working on this park that they're trying to build, right? To see if engagement in the park, or in the park space, and development of the park space is different because of exposure to all of this creative information that was coming home with the pepperoni pizza. It's a time game and doing some follow-up in person, when that's possible. But also the project is stalled because of construction waiting.

DH

Since you're working with your collaborator who already knows this community really well, and since you have worked in residencies in a lot of different communities, how do you get to know the place that you're new to?

MW

In the old normal world? That's why I haven't taken on many new projects, just because I don't know how to do that in this version of

Any pizza ordered from Old English Pizza in Bridesburg, Pennsylvania comes in a *This Pizza Is a Park* box, printed with historic photographs, games, and riverfront history. Photo from the press release for the project.



the world yet. I need to get the community connection. But in the pre-pandemic world, it was very—I don't know a good word for it—but it's just neighbor-based, following the social currents where they already exist. My typical schedule of getting to know a place is regularly going to every food joint, so like if there's a coffee shop, having some kind of routine there, like, *Oh, I go there on Tuesday mornings*. Same with the bars and then also the churches. If you go to the cafe and the bar and the church, we can usually meet enough people that they can introduce you to the folks that you don't know.

Before I get to a place, I like to do a community phone-a-thon. Usually I can [find] 30 to 40 names and numbers from a town of 5,000 or less somewhere on the internet. I'll call everyone with this set of questions to help me figure out how to get to know a place. It's often things like, "What's your favorite restaurant? Does anybody play Bingo? Who's the most interesting person in town to work with? Who hates to come to meetings?" Just trying to get a sense of that. "Are there specials? Do you have a community holiday?" Through asking

30 or 40 people those questions, you can really start to get a sense of where the social currents are in that town and who is showing up, but also who maybe hasn't been allowed to show up. It's a very casual, informal kind of interview, but it gives me enough starting places usually for when I get somewhere to know who to seek out, or who has typically been excluded from conversations that maybe I could have a chance to work with.

DH

When you say people who haven't been allowed to show up—that was something I'm curious about in reading about your work. There are probably people that have been left out of the conversation or who might not want to be visible in a certain way. I'm really curious about how you reach people who you might want to reach but might not be easy to reach or might not want to be visible.

MW

I've worked with a collective called Homeboat and we've done a lot of work together in different communities in Minnesota, where we were brought in to help a local government in a town of like 2,000 to 5,000. The call was for artists to "increase access to housing resources." It's interesting because we work in housing and equity, so we're like, *Yeah, this is great. They want to pay artists to do this? That's so interesting.* But it really came down to a city government and community leaders that were not making it possible for some of the immigrant communities to participate in this decision-making process.

The magic of the project wasn't creating some kind of new outreach thing; it was really about helping these two community groups to understand the ways they were disabling one another. If you don't provide translation, then nobody knows what you're saying, and you can't get upset that someone doesn't understand what the access to resources were! It's things as simple as that that you're surprised that a city government or community organization hasn't figured out, where a barrier can be as small as language, or as big as never providing child care. If you know that most people in this community work at the meat processing plant and you're not working on their break schedule, how do you expect anyone to show up and participate in a community event?

A lot of that we were able to figure out just by being the people who were available to go to everything. That's why we were able to figure out where those discrepancies were.

It wasn't so much about antagonism, it was about a lack of awareness for the schedule and complications and routines of the immigrant community. Once we were able to get everyone in the same room, the relationships blossomed and it was really helpful. They were able to put members of the Latinx community onto the housing committee where they could be the translators or be like, "No, no, no, no, you're not doing this right. We can't send a white man to someone's door and think that that's helpful." You have to create spaces that are safe and some community agreements around keeping one another safe before you can try to build these bridges to help one another.

DH

I admire that you're seeing where people are, where the limits are, and trying to bridge those limits or use those limits to your advantage, rather than trying to overhaul something or trying to come in and be like, "This is how you could do something," when it might not actually address the actual material or time or physical needs of the community.

MW

I just really try to keep that in mind, when I'm working with a community and I'm starting to be able to sense and identify those barriers that, for the most part, 90% of communities and especially community leaders aren't looking to create division. For the most part, if there's an opportunity to improve something, or to mend a bridge or build a bridge, they want to do it. Especially in rural spaces, it's almost always volunteers that are doing community work, and volunteers are people that are using spare time to get something done. So it's not always thoughtlessness, it's just often lack of awareness, and I think that's somewhere where it's really helpful to be working with artists and organizers to identify those barriers and then come at them in a gentle and creative way, instead of a way that makes both parties defensive, which I think is almost never helpful.

I can work with my collaborators and we can feel frustrated and we can vent to each other, but when I'm working with a community, I just want it to be positive bridge-building and criticism that comes with solutions instead of just criticism that breaks everything down.

DH

In your experiences, where have you seen people find common ground? Like, people who seem like they might not get along or there might be

an antagonistic relationship that could be easily defused—what common ground usually allows for that?

**MW**

I'll just mention this one, because it's the one I brought up, of working around housing resources in rural Minnesota. I think coming into the project, we were presented with a lot of ideas of antagonism from the host organization that had the resources. They were like, "Nobody wants it, nobody wants to do this," and presented us with so much more antagonism than we realized really existed.

Most of our solutions are usually over shared food, which is another reason the pandemic's weird. As soon as we could create some programming that got people together to be eating and drinking and sharing a meal, it felt less like a meeting or less like a workshop or less like a training. Being able to incorporate opportunities for different parts of the community to teach one another over a social environment, I felt like from there, a common ground tends to build itself because there's a breakdown in the person in power and audience, where it's a very top-down kind of way of presenting information. When it's presented socially and reciprocally, where everyone's expected that this is a mutual exchange, not

just a top-down exchange, that a lot of things can happen without facilitation. We didn't have to continue to be there for the relationships to work because the relationships found each other, and we're like, "Cool." I'm sure that they have their own share of barriers and have disagreements and of hardship, but at least there's a relationship where before there wasn't one. You always go to food.

**DH**

That is something that I miss too, food being the ultimate mediator.

**MW**

Always! Like the potluck, the happy hour, the food contest. I really, really miss potlucks. I feel like that's always been my go-to. Like, *Oh, we're having this thing, just bring a bag of chips! We're all making chips salad.* The more preposterous, the better.

**DH**

You mentioned reciprocity and, in my thesis, I wrote a little bit about the different roles that a designer can take, or how they think about facilitating or entering a space, and the potluck being the metaphor I liked because there's already reciprocity built into it. There's the idea that everyone will bring something and that



The People's Park in Fergus Falls, Minnesota. A project by the Department of Public Perks, a collaboration between Mary Welcome, Jake Krohn, Molly Johnston, and their neighbors. Photo by Jake Krohn.

you'll share together and that you're feeding each other. Could speak you more about the role of reciprocity or interdependence in your work?

**MW**

Yeah! I mean, I think it's organic, but it's cool that you're someone that also thinks about that stuff because for me, for a project to be successful in a way where it can grow some legs and have its own relationship to the community, I feel like there has to be built-in reciprocity.

Oftentimes because of the nature of the communities I work with, it's about teaching folks about compensation. That instead of asking your community members with a certain skill to continue to volunteer their time, to set up a structure for compensating them without waiting for them to ask for it, because they can receive the compensation and then put it in a place that they think it belongs, [such as] donating it back to a different community group. But on a very base level, I'm often trying to teach municipal organizations around compensation of volunteers, even if it's not monetary. Instead, it's a gift card or a pool pass, or some kind of way that anyone that is performing community service with you; you make sure that you're compensating them with time or access or something, so that they understand that you are valuing their skills and their work.

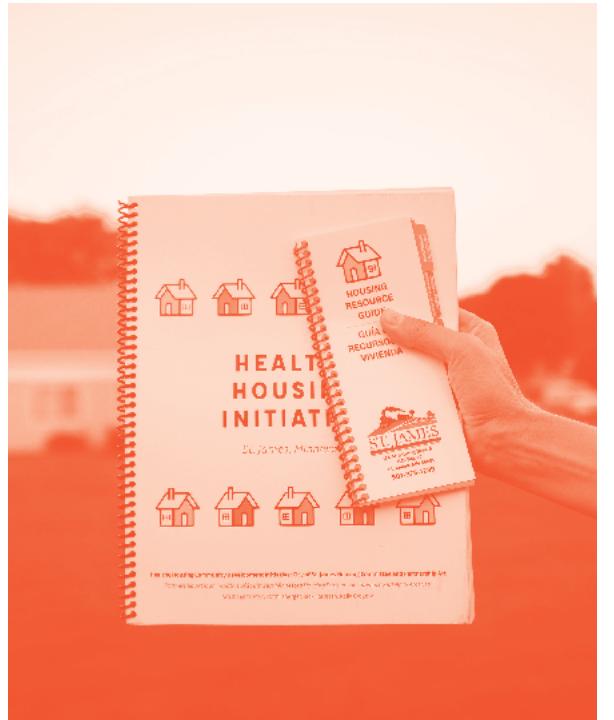
It's such a simple thing, but I think it's the reason why so much burnout in community work is because that kind of groundwork isn't laid for how we can tend to these relationships, instead of just using them until we're done.

**DH**

I have friends who are community organizers and some of what you said [around value and compensation] reminds me of how they think creatively. I'm wondering about the roles that you take on and how you shift between contexts. I read on your website that you're a councilman for the city of Palouse, and then you've also been a visiting artist. How do you shift between different contexts, maybe from a governmental context to one where you're maybe talking to a family from the community? Do you see yourself overlapping with a community organizer?

**MW**

I'd say that I often use the word "artist" because it is maybe the most disarming. Whether it's in my home community, or in other communities I work with, people love to think about an artist, because they love to think about



The *Healthy Housing Handbook*, which includes Engagement Tools, Implementation Strategies, Handyman and Advocate Programs, and a Housing Resource Guide in English and Spanish, developed with Homeboat for the City of St. James in Minnesota.

that mural, but that's obviously not the kind of work that I do. It's a disarming entry point that's often helpful because I do consider my practice as an artist to be helping people and their places work better together. That's what I like my projects to do, is to create some kind of framework for better stewardship of an engagement with place and people. It does all feel like the same thing to me, and I think the language is just using the language of whoever needs to hear it. When I'm working as a city councilperson and going to the state capitol and trying to get money, I don't often say that I'm an artist. But if I'm working with the state humanities council and trying to get money for an infrastructure project in my town, I feel comfortable saying I'm an artist.

It's so much semantics, but I think when it comes down to it, the role that I step into in a place has a lot to do with the longevity of my relationship with that place. I try to be very careful with places when I'm getting to know them. Even Palouse, I've lived here for 15 years now, I didn't decide to run for Council until last year. So still, there was a lot of participating in this place intentionally and being part of this

place before I felt comfortable putting myself in a leadership position for this place.

Maybe I always feel like I'm a visiting artist. Maybe I still feel like I'm a visiting artist, but I've just been able to level up in my intimacy with a place that I feel capable of stewarding responsible conversations as a city councilwoman. But when I'm fresh to a place, I know that it is very important for me to be a listener and to try to understand what already exists there and who exists there and respect how they exist there before I want to put myself in a position of disrupting it, unless of course I've been hired to disrupt it, like with the housing issue. But that's also delicate.

I think every place has problems and every place has huge systemic problems, but we can't change them overnight. It involves really respecting people and a place long enough to get to know them, and that's also what's going to make the relationship more powerful. But it just takes so much time. And I guess I'm just really comfortable being very patient with that. Going back over and over and over again until I can do something that is more helpful or more pointed or more accurate.

DH

I'm going to make a really blanket statement, but I feel like everything—society, innovation, everything is built on getting results really quickly. Even in community organizing, there's burnout because you don't see things changing quickly or there's just a lot you have to go up against. So this amount of patience and attention to slowness and letting things build I think it's very powerful, knowing things take a long time to change or that relationships take a long time to grow into something else.

MW

I think that that's something that's really broken about the art world as it is right now, too. It's in the same grant cycle of immediacy and impact. There's not a lot of financial support for deep, embedded, patient practice, which I do think is the kind of practice that can enact the most transformation for a person and a place.

I also think that for something successful, transformation has to go both ways. I like to feel challenged and transformed by the work that I'm involved in and I like to know that a community feels transformed and challenged by the work that they're involved in. Maybe that also goes back to questions about reciprocity and mutual benefit. I think that transformation is the greatest exchange we can have. But it's

one that takes a lot of time and just doesn't have a lot of good milestones for the grant funders. But you're like, *So-and-so finally invited me over for dinner! I've been working on that for three years!*

DH

I read one thing that talked about collaboration being a give-and-take where power dynamics are constantly shifting. How do you think about power dynamics versus what would the value be of a flattened hierarchy? Or does there always need to be a hierarchy?

MW

I don't think there always needs to be a hierarchy, and I think it's bullshit that it's built into everything, because it becomes something we have to negotiate. I did this really cool exercise with Nicole [Lavelle] before we started working on our joint research about visiting artists. We went through this collaboration exercise. It was so wonderful. I need to adapt it for some of my other projects because, before even doing the work, it was setting a lot of personal boundaries. I had time to reflect and then share with her the kind of things that make

Some questions without answers, conversational flashcards by collaborator Nicole Lavelle. Photo by Mary Welcome.



me frustrated, or what I do when I am frustrated and what kind of working environments make me feel really productive and really heard. Doing that, it was like we were answering the exact same reflections, but then being really intentional about the sharing of that and the listening of that and then creating our own personal framework for how we will respond when these environmental triggers come up. That was such a wonderful way to start a collaborative project: negotiating the things that often only get negotiated when it's too late, and then knowing when we do hit those impasses, being like, "Okay, well, let's go back to that conversation. I know this is something that makes you feel undervalued or frustrated. How can we fix that before it ruins our relationship or creates a dynamic in a relationship that is unhealthy?"

It's like, man, imagine if we did that with everything. Imagine if we did that with jobs. Imagine if we did that with friendships or with partnerships. It's something that I've really tried to introduce to my collective, where it's working with my collective before we start a project, identifying those hotspots and identifying those triggers for oppressive behavior and coming up with a plan for them before they happen, but also I think it gives everyone language that they need to express any vulnerabilities they have.

DH

Definitely, I can see people understanding why people are responding in a certain way, or to even bring up that they're uncomfortable. Often in collaborations, you either bring something up or you don't, or you just shoulder it.

MW

Yeah, you're like, *I just gotta get through this.* Something that was really helpful with my collective Homeboat was: we track our hours so that everybody is getting paid for the work that they do. But we also realize that a lot of the work of living on-site and working as a collective is domestic labor. Someone's got to figure out what we're cooking and go to the grocery store and make the meal, and so making sure that in our shared stipends, we're also compensating and tracking domestic labor. Is someone staying back to clean up the work site? That is time that they will be compensated for. Making sure we are compensating all time that was going towards the project, not just time that looked formal or was an interview. Time you spend shopping for bedding for everyone, or planning all the meals for everyone.

That was really helpful with our dynamics. We realized, *Oh, it is so much work to be on site and working as a family, and we need to make sure we're compensating all of this domestic labor that has to happen.* Because otherwise someone is shouldering it and not being compensated, which isn't fair.

DH

Totally. That's something that has come up a few times in this conversation—the idea of really seeing the effort that someone is making, and making sure that it is being seen or compensated in some way. That's something that I think about in asking for people's participation. How do I make sure that they feel safe, or that they're getting something out of this thing that I'm asking them to do? And that I'm not just extracting something from them because I'm trying to do a project?

MW

Right. I've been doing a lot of reading and writing about it because I hate how capitalist it sounds to be like, *Well, make sure you're paying people for their time.* But I'm talking about people that aren't being paid for their time, most of the time. I'm talking about the extractive resource of community relationships and community knowledge and domestic labor. This isn't to try and set up a system where we're monetizing everything. This is to set up a system where we're valuing everything, and willing to put some kind of merit on that value, whether that's time or money or goods or exchange. I think there's lots of ethical ways to compensate someone, and it doesn't all look like a paycheck. Considering that, I think, is really important and something that's really missing from our community frameworks.

DH

I like that framework of valuing. Then it becomes that every action has a value, rather than a reward system or like a gamified system.

MW

Right, which doesn't feel good. I don't want that, but I know that's how it sounds when I'm trying to talk through it quickly. But it's really about recognizing value, and it's almost always dealing with actions or parts of the community that aren't being valued.

DH

Are there any specific issues or focuses that you tend towards? Your practice encompasses

a lot of different issues, between housing, environment, the USPS... It seems maybe more so you're geared towards community and finding common ground, rather than any one thing?

MW

I usually boil it down into a very loose idea of the commons. What work can we do as a community around a shared resource, whether that resource is housing, or whether it's education, or whether it's communication and the post office.

By dealing with a shared resource, there's a built-in cohort to working on the project, right? There's going to be community stakeholders, there's going to be people who have too much and there's going to be people that don't have enough around almost every single issue of the commons. It's an easy way for my brain to start thinking through community issues, instead of just trying to identify an issue in the dark. Where are the shared resources and where are they not being shared?

DH

I wrote down your phrase "helping people and their places work better together." For me, coming from a corporate environment, I thought about efficiency a lot. Starting out, I thought, *I just need to get these things done quickly*. But then after a while, after having worked with people, it wasn't necessarily about efficiency but about the relationships that we have between each other. That we know that we're hearing each other when we're talking to each other and that will help bridge any weird gaps that we have.

MW

I struggle with this here in Palouse, we do things really inefficiently sometimes, and sometimes I'm really frustrated, but times when I can correct it is when the lack of efficiency involves not respecting someone else's time. This isn't so much about me wanting to produce as much as possible in the shortest amount of time, this is about me wanting to respect the time of the people involved in this process, and do this process in a way where everyone feels like they're participating, but also feels like their time was valued and wasn't overwrought and stretched out into a three-week time period. I think that's just something I will always be struggling with community volunteer organizations, where you know that everybody's time is scarce, but they're trying to give it. So you're trying to create systems to be efficient in the sense that you're respecting everybody's time,

and not just blowing through because you gotta use up their time as quick as you can.

DH

I volunteered with a group in Providence over the summer that was doing mutual aid and grocery deliveries. One thing that really struck me about them was that they were really intentional about their scheduling. They were like, *We know, in the fall, everyone who's working on this, a lot of them are working for the universities around here, so they're all going to be going back to school, so we have to start thinking about other systems where we're maybe bringing in the people who are receiving these deliveries, to have them be more involved in the decision-making for how this program is run.*

I was like, *Oh, okay, the people are the center of this—the people and their time and what they're able to put in is a large part of the decision-making.*

So much of your artistic community practice is rooted in building these relationships, and now I know it's shifted since it's more of a challenge to be around each other. Do you think about how you separate your work and your private life, or do they all kind of just end up intermeshing or informing each other?

MW

I have no healthy separation. I think I've tried in the past. It was when I went to try to separate work from personal life that I realized what I was doing was actually undervaluing the work that I do in my home place. I was calling that, like, *Oh, that's just when I'm home.* I've realized over the past few years, the work you're doing as a city councilperson or as mutual aid is just as integral a part of your practice, so respect it as such. I've pivoted a lot towards trying to make it all more inclusive, but also doing that means I've had to be a lot more intentional about taking time off.

That's the hard learning curve that has just wrecked me this year, because there's nowhere to go and nothing different I should go do. Trying to figure out how to separate my practice from places of rest and rejuvenation has been difficult because all the work can happen through the computer right now and I'm at home working in the community all the time. But essentially, in the future, I am designing some kind of sabbatical where I take a break.

DH

Could I ask you one last question about community? I was wondering if you've noticed people



**GOD BLESS THE USPS**, an ongoing documentary photography project of post offices in the United States, with "careful attention to rural and small-town communities." Photos by Mary Welcome.

redefine their relationships to their communities because of the pandemic?

MW

I don't think I have anything positive to say about that. I don't know if you know where Palouse is located, but it's on the Washington/Idaho border. We're a border town of two states that have treated this very differently. Our town hasn't come out of lockdown for 412 days. We haven't had any normal period where we're like, *Everything's open again!* We're just still in it. And we're next to Idaho, a state that never shut down. The issue of public safety has actually become really painful, I think, in our community, where the biggest division right now is whether or not people care about one another enough to practice public safety.

I know that, even just for me, there's a lot of relationships I have right now that are broken because of that, but also that I don't feel capable of fixing until it is safe. I think that's a really hard thing to sit in, is seeing so many fractured relationships, but also being in a situation where it is not safe to come together and work through it, or forget about it, or forgive one another for the different ways we had to cope. And that's an everyday thing that I have to manage in my interactions with my neighbors and with the public. So much is fractured and we have to wait it out. We can't

heal as a community yet because it's still not safe to do so.

DH

I lived in Seattle before I moved here, so I have a relationship with Washington, and then my boyfriend's parents live in Idaho, so—

MW

You know exactly what I'm talking about!

DH

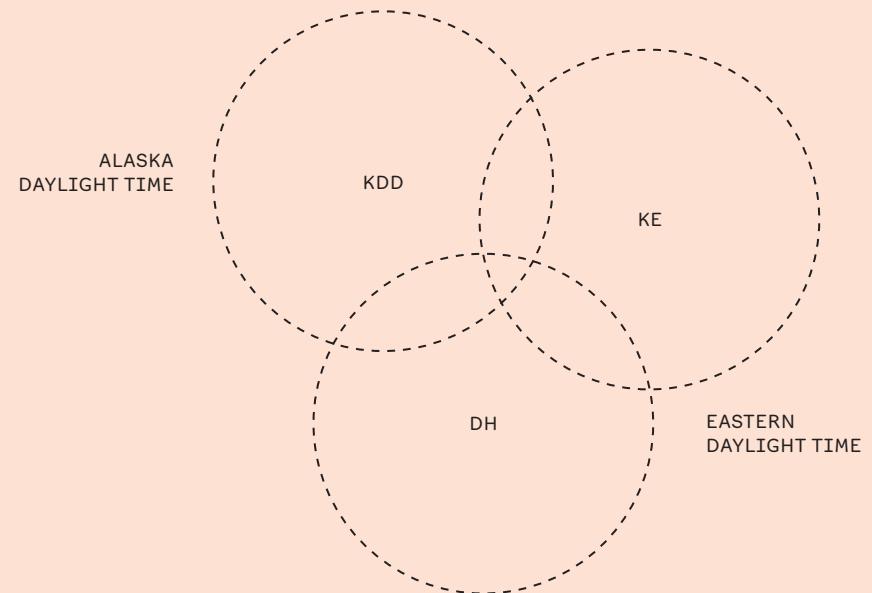
A bit, yeah! I think maybe in Providence I have not experienced such a stark contrast. I think the mutual aid gives you the feeling, like, *Yes! We're coming together and we're taking care of each other*, but then you have the reality of being on the street and you see different people taking different precautions. There's a heightened awareness that we're all coming from different places.

MW

I think there's a lot of work to be done, and a lot of work to be made about these complexities, but I'm also very aware that, at least for myself, I can't reflect on it 'til it's over. I'm just treading water! I'm just trying to survive this, and then I'll think about how we can fix everybody's wounds over this.

## INTERVIEW 2

### KEETRA DEAN DIXON & KELSEY ELDER



Several of the projects included in this book are the result of prompts given in the Experiential Design class I took in the last semester of grad school. The class was helmed by Kelsey Elder, who joyfully guided us through the five E's of experiential design (entice, enter, engage, exit, extend) and how to invite people into participatory work, both online and in person. Keetra Dean Dixon previously taught XD. Last spring, before RISD went remote, I watched my classmates taking her class giddily creating wild experiential objects. I wanted to get both Kelsey and Keetra on a call together to bounce thoughts off of each other about their own experiential design work, methods of engaging audiences, and their roles as facilitators, whether in running a project or in a classroom.

Right off the bat, we started talking about Kelsey's XD class format and how he adapted the advice that Keetra had given him, including a quick turnaround schedule that runs five projects.

### DAPHNE HSU

I am curious about the five-project structure. Is that a lot? Is it back to back schedule or do you usually overlap projects?

### KEETRA DEAN DIXON

Well, I love a three week flow within the academic environment and within the studio course structure. It's one week for generating ideas and conceiving, one week for prototyping, and then experiencing the final. You always want to tackle so many things. I love it when a population and a class takes huge risks. But you also have to balance the risk and reward and make sure there are enough successes. That just takes a lot of time. Then there's that weird thing of the shopping week during that first week. A one week structure for that is super important. I think that short assignment format is really important for keeping things not too precious and putting emphasis on prototyping.

I would have students do, upfront, a one-week-turnaround project that was about breaking stuff essentially. And then, a "leading their own workshop" [project]—them becoming the teachers, making conditional our participatory works, and no reviews, essentially. They get the assignment and then the next week we all become the users, the participants in the presentation. It's always so much fun. Everyone's scared because it's only a one-week turnaround. I force people to partner up. People are a little bit hesitant about that, but then the preservation of perfection is gone—the embracing of this more open authorship happens so seamlessly, it's like madness. Everybody learns about how to program a space, the practicality of managing the flow of people, how difficult it is to provide instruction and precise clarity versus welcoming this madness.

### KELSEY ELDER

I did a one week intro project too. You sold me on the idea—I remember you mentioning shopping week. We did have one student drop and then another couple add. It's funny because I was like, *Oh, I'll have them do a one week project that asked them to sync the class. They'll do something really stupid, like we all clap.* And they all \*poof\* went off the deep end, did such elaborate things in review. Daphne, you can remember, I was like, "Review will take an hour." And all of a sudden, it was hour three or four...

### KDD

Being a teacher and writing curriculum is a long form experiential design exercise. You're

echoing experiences you've had, you're completing the assignment yourself, you're always anticipating what the students will do—always surprising.

### KE

Absolutely. The classroom is an experience design microcosm in and of itself. I never considered it like that until a few years ago, and was like that's exactly what you're doing—you're shaping someone's experience through subject matters, you're guiding them or navigating them to hopefully make discoveries or surprises to complete the loop.

### KDD

The way you introduce ideas to people, the different modes of learning styles—experiential learning is a thing which I didn't know about until I started teaching. Then I got really into object-based learning, which really brings in exactly how you design in spaces when you don't have the opportunity to do a really formal explanation or verbose presentation and hold people's hands through the concept. You just have to be like, "There is a piece, come in!"

There's so many ways you could [teach XD]. I've tried so many times to try on other teachers' or experiential designers' methodologies and assignments and projects, and it always isn't quite right. You just have to approach it in the way that you know your personality can shape and expand the vantage point for everyone in the room. You can shape the prompt and then hand it off, and get out of people's way so they can make it amazing.

### DH

That's one of the things I was curious about with experiential design. I think teaching has a lot of overlaps too. How do you make space for the unexpected? How do you contend with a disagreement or an unanticipated encounter—the element of surprise?

### KDD

It took me a long time to trust that it will be okay. It's different depending on if I do work and I'm not there—that's when I hand off. I'm thinking a lot about consent, a lot about safety, a lot about psychological well-being and how I can responsibly hand over to the facilitators all the things that they need to be looking at and anticipating. I've learned over the years these ideas of seeding a space that doesn't have a lot of overt instruction. If you go into a museum exhibit and it tells you exactly how

you're supposed to behave in the space, and you have to read—I'm like, *No, the space should do as much of the work as possible.* You should design those instructions to be legible in non-traditional ways so it's an intuitive experience. Only when it's really difficult, then you go in and list the instructions out.

A lot of those things you need to actually tell someone. A lot of times a museum guard would be an example of this. If people aren't actually participating with a work, that's when I'm like, *Oh, you need to seed the behavior.* So then you say, "Hey, museum person who's here hanging out. If nobody's interacting, you can go up and model the behavior that you would like them to echo." To give them permission in the space that has such well-understood behavioral norms that we're asking them to break, you do have to tell people sometimes. I don't know if you all talked about Oz, this idea of the person behind the curtain, making things happen—it's magic! To tell somebody, "Okay, what you're going to do when you see someone who you can tell they're tempted to do it, but they're hesitant. You go in and you model that behavior." On the three levels of types of participants, there's a leader, joiner, and more of a passive observer. If there's not a leader in the room, then you're like, "Okay, you go in and you be the leader and they'll join in later." That's the fun part to hand over. If I'm not there, then you want to watch out for all these other things, depending on the context. If somebody is having a panic attack and you can see it start to come on, you can be like, "And also there's this other thing over here, you're allowed to leave. Once you've committed to performing, you're not obligated if it becomes uncomfortable." Considering all of that is a much heavier task if I'm not there. If I'm there, that's kind of the fun part, the unexpected, just making sure everyone is comfortable.

#### KE

I think you were asking a little bit about the trust of handing off instructions and leaving gaps. When I started teaching—I am such a control freak—I wanted to prescribe absolutely every single detail. I think that's honestly difficult learning growth.

I'll speak at it from a much different angle. When we build a car for a client—while we'll have considerations about the type of performance or colors or textures or surface, things like that—we often don't give them explicit instructions for why we gave them a certain key chain, or why we cut a key a certain

way or the firing sequence on the dash to start the car. But all of these things are taken into consideration because as soon as you grab that key, I'm trying to pick up your task of intuition. There are certain behaviors in sets of rules and instructions anyone goes through when they go to cruise in their car. We can employ certain surprises inside of that sequence and trust that that person is going to start to catch on even if it's on an emotional or visceral level. That doesn't have as much to do with permission, but I think that same sort of intuition or understanding of how people move through space or daily behavior—that if there's one thing you can also trust, it's people are going to be people. We actually have certain repeated habits.

#### DH

I want to continue this thread thinking about habits, how you read a space, and how you understand what to do in that space. You both talked about a surprise or disrupting a space, like disrupting a gallery space. How do you think about what happens when someone encounters that experience again when they already know what to expect? How much of your work is thinking of something that's a one-off or thinking about something that people will return to? How might those two goals differ, or how might those two goals shape your decisions?

#### KDD

I'm working with defamiliarizing behavioral norms: whether it's a handheld experience like a tool or whether it's a space, there's usually this script, these behavioral norms that we understand, then working against those. Like Kelsey is highlighting, there are a lot of these things that are habitual and not highlighted. We can highlight those moments by tweaking them a little bit. Or you can borrow from other mental models of other well-understood spaces. In that, you tell an audience what the behavioral norms are to then defamiliarize that space, layering on these other behaviors.

For example, the *Swing Hall* [Keetra's project *Swing Hall, Swing All*]: it's a thoroughfare, a skyway walkway between two buildings. We know how to use that space. Then I layered in a mental model of an amusement park ride. In the five E's—entice, enter, engage, exit, extend—every moment I'm pushing the divergence from the thoroughfare further because the audience already understands: *Oh, what is this? Obviously people are performing, I'm not really sure what I should do.* Then they get



*Swing Hall, Swing All* at Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Keetra Dean Dixon, 2012. Image courtesy of the designer.

in line, then there is a wristband to ride and immediately they're like, *This is an amusement park ride.* They might not consciously know that I'm dealing with that model, but they know that the social courtesies that exist at an amusement park now apply within the space as well, so you're only going to stay as long as an amusement park ride, et cetera.

Repeat visitors—it depends on the humans, of course—will become more adventurous and more inventive. That permission was given, they took a little bit of risk, they felt what was actually like to be inside the ride versus outside of it, so that "entice" moment looks like it's delightful and fun. And then you get inside of [the experience] and it's uncomfortable and awkward. The social navigation is really difficult and for some people—it's very stressful. But some people figure out some really beautiful things, like if you hook legs together. They haven't gotten enough time to exhaust the possibilities, so in the next round they become the people who are inventing and giving more permission to other people.

Defamiliarization has an expiration date. Usually in my work, it's very short. Initial impact

is defamiliarized, you learn how it's been defamiliarized, you understand the process. Then it completely goes into your hands for more innovation. That's the most exciting part: what the inventive collaborative moments will be like or how people will use tools and break them. That's the best part, making sure there's room.

#### KE

It's so nice to hear you talk about it on an intervention level. I thought about it as a magic trick in which, once it's unveiled, you become a little bit more interested in all of the nuances and mechanics.

I can speak in terms of a programming sense, which I think is more the realm of XD I have. I think of the same sort of processes that Keetra just described a lot too. In the programming of car shows, the challenge is: how do you have people engage over a duration of time which is very, very long, like eight-to-ten-hours kind of long? It's having to think about cycles of enticement and engagement, and thinking about the peak of the emotional discourse over that duration of time, which obviously starts and ends at a really high point: the

## INTERVIEW 2

entry to the car show, everyone's rolling in, it's a very big spectacle, and then the end, which is typically awards or the ceremony.

I got started with a local car club in Minneapolis called Euro Werks which had annual car shows—very big, one of the biggest ones in the Midwest. We ended up with programming that borrowed gaming convention and transcribed it into a car show space. We developed things like car limbo. There were spark plug contests to get the changing of spark plugs. We took all of these behaviors that most participants would understand how to do and added some aspect of a game to it. The first year was novelty, I would say. Most people didn't know the rules to play; there was a lot of stumbling. But the next year, people anticipated it and they started to bring their own wrenches, for instance. Or they started to bring sandbags to load their car up. Or they would get 10 or 20 of their friends piled onto the car. They started to hack the system or really mess with it. People began to anticipate it. By year four or five, the challenge became: what are the other games we can add or how do we keep the surprise going?

Dubs in the Valley car show, a Volkswagen and Audi-based enthusiast event. Image courtesy of Kelsey Elder.



It became ritual, it transformed into another space, which I think is always really exciting. Why I love programming car shows is because you see an unexpected or defamiliarized situation—intervention—achievable once, it becomes beloved. Then it's like, *Okay, how do we keep the fun going?*

## KDD

You program the whole day around a loop that's big entice, enter, engage, exit, extend, and then these micro experiences that have entice, enter, engage, exit, extend. Then over years, you're creating this subculture and tradition.

## KE

I didn't have language for what was occurring or the impact it does have because the community would be returning. Of course the show would grow every year, but it would also be continual participants, which is interesting because typically it would be social networks networking out. One friend of the group would go to the car show, and then the next year, they bring all of their friends.

## KDD

It's a great example of social object theory at play, which is a beautiful crossover between experiential design to sociological ritual development.

When I graduated grad school and I went to the lab, they did not know what to call me. They called me an experience orchestrator. I did borrow a lot from psychology, understanding that people will remember the start of a story and the end of the story. Unless you put a peak in the midst of it, which is right before the third act resolution, they won't remember the duration of the experience. They won't remember a lot of the social encounters because everyone has this very intuitive social anxiety when they're unsure what they are expected to do, when they're observing others more than they're thinking about themselves. It's all of these very intuitive things. You program the space: here's the sunrise, here's the sunset, this is the natural model we're borrowing from. Then later, you start teaching the class [XD] and you're like *Ohh this, it's very clear*. It's like when both Kelsey and I started teaching, you're just being a human, listening to yourself and listening and watching others and then reinforcing those things until you figure it out.

## DH

I think that's a really interesting thing about experiential design, and maybe other types of graphic design—where it ends up in the world, how people interface with it, how something becomes a ritual, and how it becomes something where people invite other people into the experience. I think that's really exciting to me, that kind of unexpected [behavior]. Hopefully, a design could lead to something [that] people coalesce around.

## KDD

Absolutely, it's one of those things that when it works, it's so humbling because I never think it's quite going to work.

There's danger there—you need to be responsible when you're considering all of these things. Going back to your previous question, how do you adapt when something is unknown and how do you make space and be responsible about it... I think shaping things with positive social signals is hugely important. But also trusting the audience to shape an experience in a way that is also positive is very important, so that's another thing to watch out for when things go off the rails, it may be in a negative or harmful way. How to positively steer things

back into this collective authorship. It's always magical.

## KE

I love how you are mentioning the reinforcement of positive or joy because I think XD can amplify every aspect of our human existence. I think a lot about what is responsible to add amplification to, especially given current settings. I'm not saying that we might not dip into fear or shame or guilt or other things like that. But I think about what are we choosing to amplify inside of one's human experience and then what might be the ramifications of what that is linked with. To Keetra's point, how do you steer it back when maybe a well-intentioned thing has an unexpected outcome, because at the end of the day, we're human, we can only draw from our prior human experiences to understand potential effects—in addition to conversations with others, of course.

But I think that's sort of the scary aspect of risk, which is the unintended linkages.

## KDD

I was going to say that the thing about surprise, delight, wonder, awe, and fear, a lot of times it's this gradient and making sure that people don't go too far into the fear. Too much loss of control. It's so contingent on the audience and also moving people through an experience in a way that gives them enough empowerment, control, and comfort level that at what point that appropriate moment of almost loss-of-self and awe versus fear and risk is right. Literally programming the space and programming when those things happen is super important. It's so contingent on the participants, so it is so important that you know the audience beforehand as well.

## KE

What are you linking fear with? Is fear linked with surprise versus fear and shame?

The car show no longer runs, but I worked on Dubs in the Valley [a Volkswagen/Audi-based enthusiast event in Wisconsin]. It ran for 10 years and I worked on it for the last three. One of the events we programmed was we bought a beater car, a really, really old rust-bucket Volkswagen, and we would fill it with PBR—it would always explode, the engine would explode because you're filling a car with PBR—and seeing how long it will run. The answer is actually some of them would run for five minutes. Anyways, it is a fearful moment. People are betting on it, there's going to be a loud

surprise at some point, but people don't know when it's going to happen.

**KDD**

That audience, also, is probably familiar with that type of explosion.

**KE**

Well, hopefully not.

**KDD**

Maybe they know the content, like I would be like *Oh, I have no idea*. I would think it would be like a movie, where everybody's running.

**KE**

Start a fire.

**KDD**

Exactly. So much of my inspiration comes from personal experience, which again is why it's really important to know your audience, know the context.

**DH**

Thinking about audience in context, when you start an experimental project—I guess it really depends on who your audience ends up being, if you know them very well—but I'm wondering: do you start from the audience or participants' perspective first, thinking about how they're going to experience something? Or do you go concept or object first?

**KE**

I'm almost always thinking about audience in some form. I think going through different roles inside of your process for how one might experience it informs different strategies you might take or different ways you might fulfill a certain objective or goal. I find if you don't really consider how a participant or an audience member is going to experience a work until a later point, you miss someone's opportunity. I'm almost always thinking about how someone would receive any given piece of work or intervention.

Same with course materials—if I was a student, especially at the sophomore level or whatever the class, could I read this? Would I be interested in this? Am I bored? I think about them often, especially inside of a process-feedback-loop scenario.

I also love just making up roles. I think about my dad as an archetype: what would 60-year-old Wyatt think, who sits in front of work and goes, "What would you do with it?" That's part of the fun and play inside of process

too, which is giving yourself permission to pretend you're someone else within reason, or a prior version of yourself at a younger age or a future older version of yourself. I'm curious about you, Keetra.

**KDD**

I second all of that, absolutely. I have a list of common psychological rules that you can embody because a lot of times—to Kelsey's point about to what extent you are capable of actually embodying these other roles—there are some modes of thinking that are just never intuitively going to occur to me. So now I go to this externalized list and I'm like, *Am I being the moderator? Am I being this type? Am I being the cheerleader?* (I'm always the cheerleader...)

Part of the reason I became a designer to begin with was because it gave me a chance to try to get to empathize and understand someone that otherwise I might not get to, to see it from somebody else's perspective, which is everything to me. I used to make work literally for my dad or my brother. They become these archetypes. I want them to understand me but, more importantly, I want to understand them. Now that I've had to do it professionally, in one context, I might not be able to be like, *This is my dad. My dad would think this*. So I switch out the archetype that I'm talking about in those moments.

Coming at it from that design perspective, where I'm trying to think through the audience or participants' sides first, now I'm doing work that's about my voice, which is very confusing and complicated. I'll start with an internal, self-reflective [process]: here's how I approach it, here's a process I'd like to share with someone else, this intra-personal intelligence. For me to understand what I do intuitively, maybe without knowing it, I spend a lot of time thinking about that—I become clear on that. And then when I'm about to make a work for someone else, I still go to the audience that I want to be talking to. Even when it's about my point of view and my process, it's always about: how can I, in a productive and permission-giving way, extend that to someone else and allow departure? It's about extending my point of view first, but also very quickly becomes something that they can own and opens up into new authorship. Always audience first.

You had asked also about context—I think those are two distinct things. You have a happenstance audience that inhabits context often. Sometimes you're asking an audience to inhabit a new space. That's one type of thing to

consider. And then you always have the inhabitants of a space if it is occupied, which you have to consider additionally. These are all of the equations that I really love learning about, disrupting, solving again, reconfiguring the social equation.

**DH**

I taught a Wintersession course, *Intro to Graphic Design*, and I had all freshmen. I think one thing that I didn't do beforehand was think about what freshmen are like and what 18-year-olds are like. Or what is their relationship to technology. I only really thought, *Oh, everyone knows how to use Zoom and Canvas and everything so it's not a problem*. How do you develop your empathetic muscle or think about inhabiting other people's perspectives?

**KDD**

When I can, if I get to meet the people, I ask a ton of questions all the time—probably inappropriately so. Too many questions. But for the teaching thing, it took me a long time. I have the student info. It helps me so much

*Doublloon*, excerpt from the *Objects of Codependency*, Keetra Dean Dixon, 2015—ongoing. Image courtesy of the designer.



when I'm teaching. I ask sensorial questions as well: "What are you listening to? What language do you think in?"—and I'll put in parentheses "Visual counts as a language," because that's the language I think in. "What are your favorite snacks? What are you listening to (music)? What are you listening to (podcast)? What are you watching? Leisure watching and "responsible" academic watching?" Because so many of the students are like, "Oh, I'm supposed to put the canon down here" and I'm like, "No, no, no, I really want to know—is it Rick and Morty? Tell me because if I haven't seen it, I'm going to watch it so I understand you more." It reveals how ingrained in tech they are. If they're listening to the Verge podcast everyday, I'm like, "Okay, cool." I'll probably interrogate that person a little bit more on what their vantage point is on a topic that we're discussing.

If I don't get to meet an audience, if it's broader: tons of research. It's a microcosm of the same stuff that I would do, just stalk—usually digitally. I love to do passive observation. I really miss being in New York City sitting on a bench in a very specific space

and just watching and watching and watching forever. But if I can actually talk to a person: interviewing.

KE

I'm laughing so hard, because I think, on the first day of XD, I asked them a majority of those exact same questions.

I remember talking with Harsh Patel early in my teaching career. He said that sometimes he teaches in a way that he doesn't even assign anything for the first three months because there's no purpose in creating the work if you don't understand each other. I was like, *Wow, that's such a powerful thought.*

I totally agree [with Keetra] and so I'm also just curious. I like understanding how things work, and that includes—

KDD

People!

KE

People, exactly. I think that is because it's been a coping mechanism for me, understanding social dynamics in relationships, when I naturally struggle greatly with it. When possible, I'm asking questions. I like intaking things. I think you [Daphne] experienced this in XD, when you guys were like, "Oh, this is my favorite snack." I was like, "Okay, for Forough, I'm going to go try that yogurt." A lot of people had different YouTube series or musicians. On my next run, I'll listen to that or watch that. Even if it's not interesting [to me], that helps me understand what makes this person tick.

When it's not possible: upsetting levels of looking at Instagram profiles, or trying to understand or embody that person. I think technology has afforded us a really amazing ability to connect; there haven't been many situations where I didn't at least have some sort of contact with the context or participants in some electronic fashion, at least.

DH

In the process of working, how do you like to collaborate with other people? Or what kind of roles you find yourself taking in a collaboration.

KE

Collaboration was not easy for me at the beginning. I think it largely was due to a twofold problem: number one, I very much lacked social communication skills, and then number two, I'm such a control freak, I couldn't even think inside of that space. Through generous feedback,

I've learned that it's actually really, really valuable because it gives you a moment, like a really, really intimate moment with someone else to see how they mechanically operate.

It's similar to the magic in the classroom. While I've been teaching, there are these moments where you see two gears click together and something small moves forward, whether or not that has to do with typographic skill or someone achieving a sense of belonging. There are these click moments.

For me, collaboration is really helpful to understand how others synthesize their work through ideas. One of my favorite parts is actually like, *What are you doing? What is your form?* For instance, watching Hannes Vermeras draw type—watching what his hands are doing, how everything is moving, and how he's moving through screens—it's like watching a Formula 1 driver. I was very not a collaborator for much of my life. I had a moment where my mentor in grad school turned to me and said, "You have to say hello to people."

KDD

Kelsey, I just fell in love with you.

KE

I think it's really funny that I teach but teaching does give you this mild ability to perform, like the classroom as a performance space. It gives me a little ability to be a person I actually am not. I'm not saying I'm not myself when I teach; I'm way more social or engaged with others. I'm typically an observer, not like a cheerleader or active participant. But I think, for me, learning the value of collaboration, but also understanding why my body felt the way it did in certain moments, like, *Why am I feeling defensive? Why are these things circulating?* was actually really helpful.

DH

That's helpful to hear because I think the idea of collaborations always sounds very good—you're working with other people—but I think they're actually a very fraught space. There's power dynamics at play, like you're learning what to give, learning what to take, learning what to let sit. I'm also very curious about other people's processes, like how they go about doing things or how they go about thinking about things. Especially with experiential design, you're probably working with other people to fabricate or to put things together or put things on, and then you're also working with your audience to some extent.

KE

I love how you just said to keep, to give, and to let sit.

KDD

Collaboration is fraught, absolutely. It's like love—[there's] this illusion that there's not an immense amount of effort. Collaboration is tough, and I think that's actually why I started doing participatory work for all the reasons Kelsey outlined. I was going into performance and musical theater and figure skating, so I've been trained to be a cheerleader since I was a kid. It's performative. When I'm in a social space I'm like [cheering noises.] We are all different versions of ourselves in different contexts. It's a very natural human thing. But for a long time, I was like, *I'm being inauthentic.* I don't feel like it is inauthentic. It's how I can be in spaces with other people. I'm usually silent; I am an observer. I do a lot of crazy bodily-based expression that I tamp down when I'm in social spaces. But when I'm actually working [collaboratively], I've always had a hard time because I am a control freak, I am insecure, I have crazy social anxiety, all the things. But I love people. I love seeing how they work. I want to collaborate with them.

Those half-conversations are like controlled collaboration. I will do this part and then I'll step back and I get to be my most natural, quiet, watching self when they answer. I learn from that—*Oh, this gives me new ideas, etc.* But it took me a long time to understand how quickly I adapt to the chemistry in a very specific group dynamic. I don't love being the person in charge. I like flat hierarchies. That's also a giant lie—it's so hard to get a truly flat hierarchy. But there've been two really great moments, one within the architectural firm, where I helped found a lab. We were all beautifully dysfunctional in very complimentary ways; we're all headstrong and insecure, so it just was wonderful and was actually a flat hierarchy. We did not know rules of brainstorming, we did not know rules of improv, so there was also fighting, but we figured them out. We were all researchers and we're like, "Oh, there's this thing called 'yes and.'" You don't edit while you're having an idea. Then we all fell in love with rule-structures around how to collaborate and it offered us so much relief. We again got to trust one another so unedited-ly that I got to see how these other people's brains worked in this very candid, raw way, which was the most rewarding thing. I think that's now what I look for in every single tiny glimpse.

I think of teaching as collaborating. But it's hard, like it's rare and it's hard. I don't think enough people are open about that so I'm very glad that you are being like, "Collaboration is tough." I think everything is kind of collaborative in a way, which is such a Nicolas Bourriaud thing, like observing a painting deeply is a form of participation.

KE

You're drinking the Kool Aid.

KDD

I buy it. I like a little more balance because it's easier to actually learn from the people I'm partnering with when there's more action involved.

DH

I think that's something that I've realized—maybe through grad school, maybe right before grad school—is that [collaboration] is similar to experiential design where you are thinking of your audience, you're thinking of the space, you're thinking of what agreements are set up. In a collaboration—how you were talking about the rules of brainstorming or the rules of improv—it helps to have set conditions or set rules. It's that understanding of what you're getting yourself into, and then you can start enacting those roles.

KDD

You get into whatever field you think you're going to go into, and then you maybe don't anticipate the promotional aspect, and then all of a sudden you're a manager. Then you're just preserving and protecting people on your team and trying to motivate. This is what it all is—again, it's the social equation. Changing my focus to solving what all the players need becomes my role in collaborating. Sometimes when I'm focused on the work and fighting for doing the best thing in this one moment, I have to be like, *No, no, no, no.* *The best moment is going to come out of the best chemistry from this collaborative experience.* How can I figure what unspoken rules there are for everyone? And figure out how to facilitate all of those rules into the way that we're actually collaborating? Which is this management tool, which I didn't realize.

DH

Kelsey, I was wondering if that [social rules] is something you think about too in teaching. Having had you as a professor in a few classes, I feel like you're meeting people where they are.



Kelsey Elder (center) and Destiny Griesgraber (right) participating in Dora Oncul's (left) tin can telephone-inspired project during an Experiential Design class crit. Photo by Madi Ko.

KE

That's nice to hear. Teaching is like sharing – I'm borrowing that from hearing Ramon [Tejada] describe it that way. In order to share, you have to figure out how to meet people on their level. When you can do that, then you can drive them or push them or nudge them. I realized, despite my resistance to collaborate in design spaces, I've always played team sports. I've always actually been a very team-oriented individual. The problem was I just never mashed that mental model with the design space, and never was told to. Quite frankly, undergrad was very competitive in an individualistic way.

For XD, for instance, I've remarked that I don't think that class could ever exist again how it's existed this semester for a number of reasons. It's a pandemic. I had every one of you students except for one, and I had many of you in multiple different classes, which allowed me to be like, *Okay, I kind of know the vibe*. There's going to be a couple of wild cards in here. I know, especially for some of the younger students, they could really benefit from being in a space with grads and seniors, a richer understanding of the GD community. In shaping the course, I thought very strongly about those people that were in it.

I've almost always been term-position, so it's constant new social dynamics and circles. There'll be moments teaching where a TA will come up to you afterwards and be like, "I don't know if you know, but like you know, Joe and Bobby you know broke up two months ago, and you should not be putting them in a crit group together," and it's, "Oh shit, I didn't know." It's really nice when you're afforded the ability to have that social context. I think about it a lot. The "do no harm of teaching." You don't want to enter a social dynamic space irresponsibly or refuse to read it. You're the one, Daphne, [that in Seminar II brought up] Maslow's hierarchy of needs. I think it came up a bit as a joke and a coping mechanism to deal with the pandemic and all that. I was like, "No, but like if we were to map that to what the institution thinks students need versus what students actually need, I bet they say two completely different things." It's inside of that friction that I think growth as a teacher or institution can emerge.

DH

I read a thing about thinking about collaborations among designers. One of the things it talked about was the students at this place were hosting events: they were like putting

on talks, putting on panels. It started talking about the designer as a host, which I thought was interesting because it talks explicitly about how, as a host, you have to facilitate exchanges, figure out how you invite people in.

I was wondering if you have a metaphor for how you think about yourself in a participatory or experiential space. What roles do you inhabit as a designer?

KE

I say "coach." I think one of the really important things for any designer is that you have a community that has nothing to do with graphic design, or it has nothing to do with teaching. bell hooks proposes this idea that teachers exist in all aspects of our life. My coach wouldn't call himself a teacher, but he inhabits many good personality traits that are very simple and structural: you greet every individual when they come into the room, you thank them for their time, you acknowledge them at some point during your session with this team. Every one of those individuals has direct contact with you in some capacity. You check in about what's happening outside of the gym with them inside of that moment. Are you tired? Are you sore? How are you feeling? I think I translate a lot of that to the classroom space, especially on Zoom. Our visiting artist two weeks ago, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, proposed the idea: the first thing you should ask students is, "Have you eaten? Have you slept well?" My coach talks a lot about what happens inside the gym is 100% affected by everything happening outside of it.

If I were to think about a mental model, it's probably coach. I've gotten feedback that's like, "Kelsey can be a bit camp counselor-y." And I'm like, "Okay, so that means I'm getting close."

KDD

You are a cheerleader! I knew it!

I have one that I battle all the time, which is "mama bear." I tend to be preserving people, or I'm like, "Back the hell off." I'm human – it's fine! But "nurturer" is a big one, "facilitator," "moderator." I call her "Teacher Keetra," which is embarrassing. Before you start doing a role you're like, *Oh, I bet I'll be like this*, or *Here's what I'm gonna be*. And then you get in there and you're like, *Oh, nope. Here's who I am in this space. I'm just gonna have to deal with it*. The "mama bear" part was really surprising. I definitely know that I need to be like, *Stop performing*. When I'm super nervous I'm like \*grinning widely, gesturing\* and

it's very hard for me to digest and listen and reflect. I'm like, *That is what I need to be doing, I need to listen and reflect*. The "mama bear" part I know will always be there; the cheerleader, motivator part I know will always be there. For some reason people tell me that I'm not a harsh critic, but I think I just sandwich it so it doesn't feel as bad.

KE

Some nice Wonder Bread on either side.

KDD

The shit sandwich. I've called it the crit sandwich. The crit sandwich, which is, yes, Wonder Bread, poo. But I put sprinkles on the poo so you don't even see it.

Teacher Keetra is not always in alignment with what I want.

KE

Oh, me too. I've had moments where I'm like, *Okay, you're gonna go in and you're going to be really concrete and only give them two minutes of feedback and be really stern*. And then I get in there and I'm like, "It's okay!" Where's this coming from? I can't even achieve this in my personal relationships and here I am.

KDD

To go to the designer-as-host thing – for some reason, in the design role, I'm very conscious. I always have a uniform for different roles. If I have my art director glasses on and my creative director heels on –

DH

I wore my fun shirt [for the interview]. I wanted a fun vibe.

KDD

Exactly! I feel different. When I'm in a creative director role I don't have as much "mama bear" in me, especially if I'm talking to a client. I think it's performative, like I've trained myself into that for so many years. I actually am not as much of a host unless the role is hosting. That might be because of a lot of the client relations I've had to deal with or maybe some of the people I've worked for.

When I'm in that really flat hierarchical space, in those rare team instances, I am so not self-aware in those moments. I think I probably move through all the states of my personality in different contexts.

But when I'm in a designer-designer role, I'm not often a host. I interrupt a lot. I

own the room. If I'm in a space that I don't have to be that way, I'm not. I'm a little bit more of a moderator. It's complicated.

I like the idea of designer-as-host. But I would think about it. I think of a lot of figures that exist in both the curatorial/exhibit/editor space and designer space—I wouldn't even call them designers, then, actually. I would just call them hosts or moderators.

KE

Lucy [Hitchcock] told me crit is like a dinner party. And the teacher's role is to host it.

KDD

Yes, Lucy uses that metaphor a lot a lot, such a good one! Think about the lighting, think about the music, know a good fact for each person that's visiting; those I think are actually perfect for small talk before. The designer role—you're hosting at the beginning of a meeting and then you're like, "Alright! Now me. Listen, listen."

DH

I think that's a useful way to think about it. Instead of pushing the designer role into a metaphor to think about what are the different roles you inhabit throughout a space or throughout a time in space.

KDD

What is the experience design?

KE

Full circle.

DH

With experiential design, with participatory work where you're working with audiences, how do you evaluate it afterwards? Maybe in terms of success, if you measure in terms of success? In contrast to other forms of graphic design artifacts, where you have a book and you can measure it in certain ways, or a website and there's certain numeric and non-numeric metrics, how do you evaluate participatory work?

KDD

I definitely have two things that I try—not literally poll an audience, but sometimes literally poll an audience. What did they say? And what did they remember? Social media is great for it. A lot of times, people will use words that they saw through the experience. If they use those words again then I'm like, *Yes, that was the objective I was going for*. They reflected that back

to me literally. Then, when people volunteer new stories, they surprise me and I'm happy with the alignment with those objectives that were outlined at the beginning of a project. So: what do they say, repeatability, what do they remember, and if they can map their own story into the experience.

KE

I think very similarly, throughout any given experience: what are people seeing or feeling or remarking? What are they remembering or noting? Car shows always have reviews that end up coming out so you do get some form of criticism from car magazines writing about the show and experience. While often they're talking about the cars, they are noting the social conditions surrounding the object. They are talking about the organization and how one felt through the engagement.

The other side of that is—you talked a little bit about documentation and you didn't really say documentation, but you talked about the object-ness of graphic design and how normally we can quantify through image or documentation, the success or validity of that. At least in my practice—other than the large supergraphic stuff, which is an object and I can show you that it was successful because it existed—I think documenting one's experience through the experience is really important so that you can get the candid reaction shot. At the end of the day, seeing someone's expression or engagement or surprise or delight is a lot better than "the scene was achieved." Sometimes you just can't document it. You know it occurred, but the camera wasn't right. It has to do with a little bit of permission to say it was something that was ephemeral, will never exist again, I'm not going to document it or encapsulate it in that way. But to your question, being really clear about what you define success as before you go about the installation so that you can compare the dataset metrically: what did I think would happen, what did I think people's reaction would be, what did I think their behaviors are, what actually occurred, what actually did I observe, where was there overlap and where is there schism?

## INTERMISSION

### PART 2

IMG 1-2

Project A  
*Video Chat Comp. 1: Alphabet*  
screenshots from Zoom  
→ page 17

IMG 3

Project A  
*Video Chat Comp. 2: Hug*  
screenshots from Zoom  
→ page 21

IMG 4

Project A  
*Video Chat Comp. 3: Connection*  
screenshots from Zoom  
→ page 25

IMG 5

Project B  
*As Luck Would Have It*  
calendar  
→ page 31

IMG 6

Project B  
*As Luck Would Have It*  
lottery ticket  
→ page 31

IMG 7

Project C  
*Stairwell Games*  
choose-your-own  
adventure stairs  
→ page 37

IMG 8

Project C  
*Stairwell Games*  
soccer field  
→ page 37

IMG 9-10

Project D  
*Providence River Scavenger Hunt*  
booklets  
→ page 41

### IMG 11

Project E  
*Propaganda Game*  
instruction sheet  
→ page 47

### IMG 12

Project E  
*Propaganda Game*  
postings  
→ page 47

### IMG 13

Project F  
*A Book That Grows: Community Reader*  
accordion book spread  
→ page 51

### IMG 14

Project G  
*Commonplace*  
screenshot of website  
→ page 55

### PART 3

### IMG 15-17

Project H  
*How to Get a Diamond*  
screenshots of website  
→ page 119

### IMG 18

Project I  
*Furies*  
screenshot of website  
→ page 125

### IMG 19-20

Project J  
*GardenWorld*  
screenshot of experience  
→ page 131

### IMG 21

Project K  
*Meticulous Drawing Tools*  
screenshot of website  
→ page 137

### IMG 22-23

Project L  
*A Book That Grows: Garden Reader*  
book spreads  
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### IMG 24-25

Project L  
*A Book That Grows: Submersion Reader*  
book spreads  
→ page 145

### IMG 26

Project M  
*Peer, Peer, Peer, and Peer*  
invitation packet  
→ page 149

### IMG 27-28

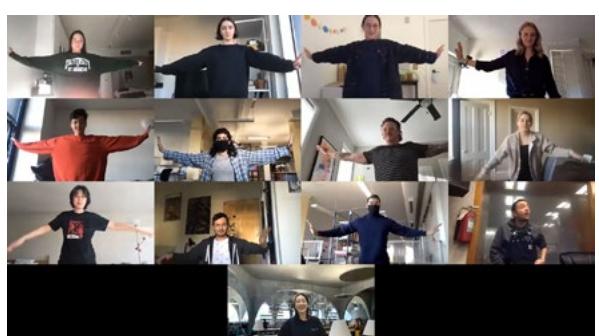
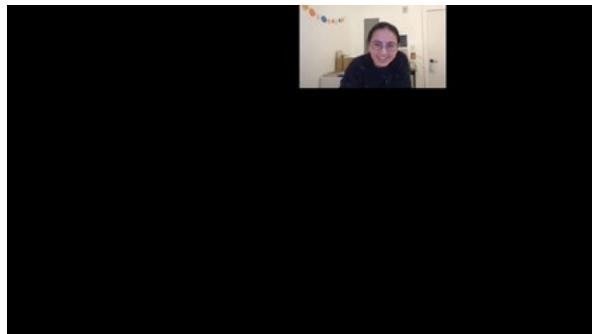
Project M  
*Peer, Peer, Peer, and Peer*  
screenshots of meeting site  
→ page 149

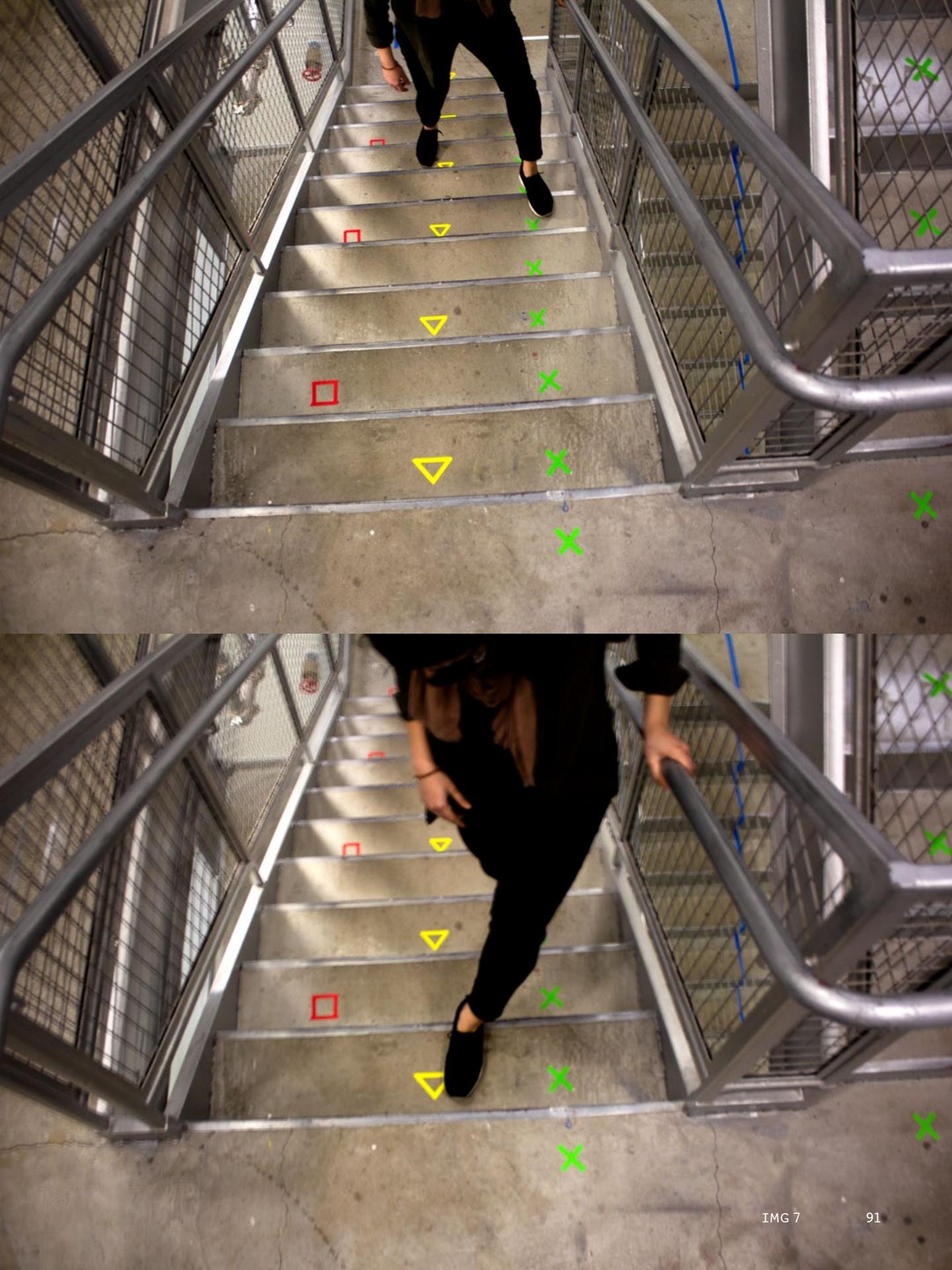
### IMG 29

Project N  
*Design School Briefs*  
screenshot of brief archive  
→ page 157

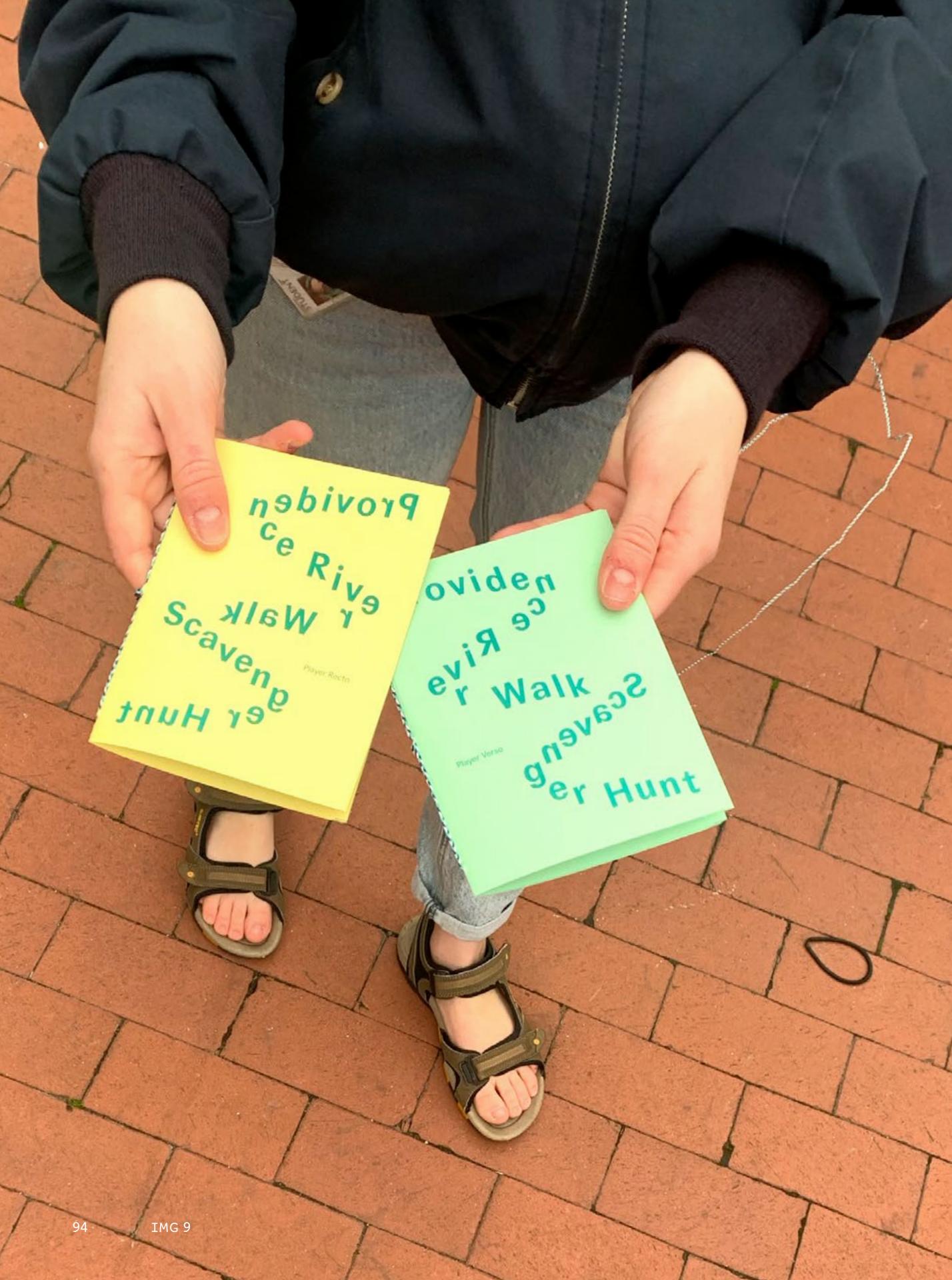












94

IMG 9



95

IMG 10

# PROPAGANDA GAME

## ROUND 1: CREATE

BRAINSTORM A CAUSE OR POSITION MEANINGFUL TO YOU THAT YOU WANT TO SPREAD TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD RELATING TO OUR SHARED SPACE IN THE STUDIO. USE THE VISUAL TOOLKIT ON THE OTHER SIDE TO ORGANIZE YOUR ASSETS.

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO STIMULATE OTHERS TO THINK OR DO?  
WHAT IDEA DO YOU URGENTLY WANT TO GIVE VOICE TO?

CREATE A SIGN OR IMAGE ON PAPER WITH THE TOOLS AVAILABLE TO YOU. BE STRATEGIC AND CONCISE IN ASSEMBLING YOUR MESSAGE.

## ROUND 2: PROPAGATE

HANG YOUR SIGN/IMAGE UP IN A STRATEGIC SPOT IN THE STUDIO.

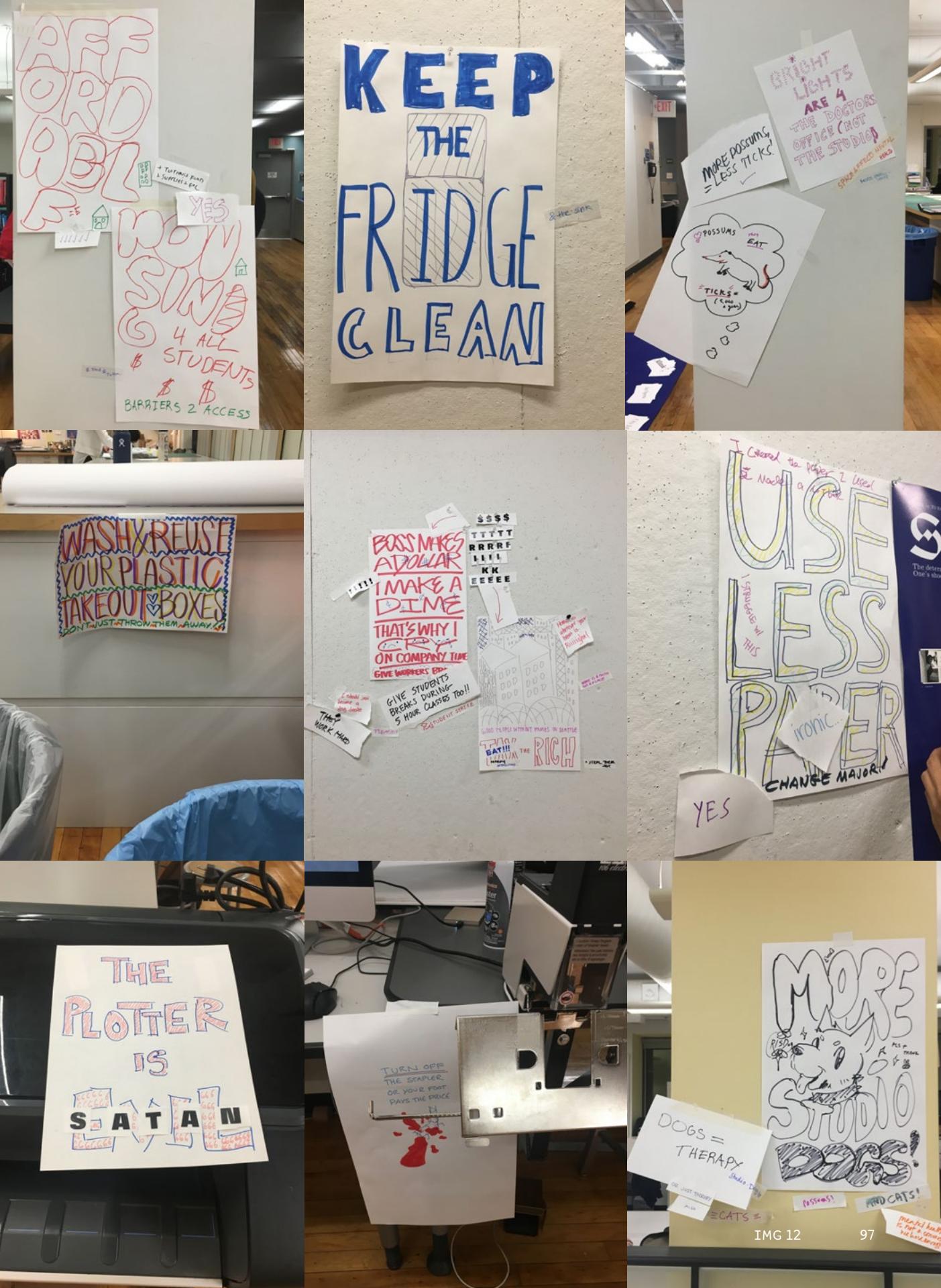
## ROUND 3: ACT

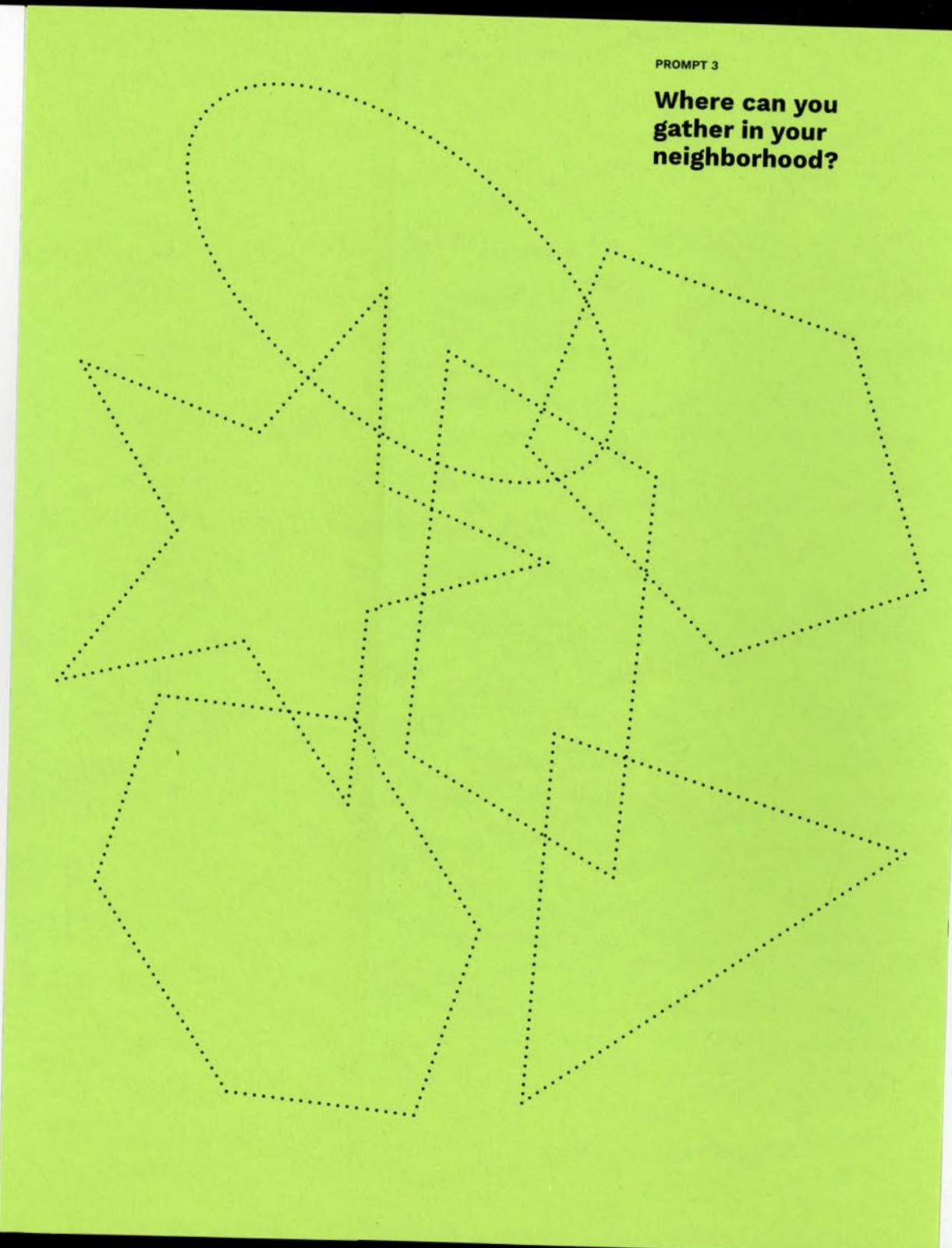
LOOK AT ALL THE SIGNS AND IMAGES. WHAT DO YOU REACT TO? WHAT PROVOKES? CREATE OR PERFORM RESPONSES TO THESE SIGNS AND IMAGES.

**PROPAGANDA:** THE MASS PROMOTION OF IDEAS

"WE ALL HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO BEWILDER, HUMOR, PROVOKE, INSPIRE, AND CONVINCE OTHERS WITH CONCISE AND MEASURED MOVES. PROPAGANDA IS A STRATEGIC DEVICE UTILIZING THE STRENGTH OF CONCEPT WITH RELATIVELY LITTLE RESOURCES, MAKING IT POWERFUL IN THE SERVICE OF EVEN THE MOST MARGINALIZED POSITIONS." —MELISSA J. FROST

SPECIAL TY TY TO  
FOROUGH, KIT, ROMIK, WILL,  
RYAN, SOPHIA, AND ELENA





PROMPT 3

Where can you  
gather in your  
neighborhood?

READING 3

HANNAH BLACK

## GO OUTSIDE

Hannah Black's Year in Review

ALL RIOTS EMIT A WORLD-HISTORICAL SHINE, but the George Floyd uprisings were extra radiant because they opened the doors of the world. The riots saved social life by proving that it was possible, with masks and moving air, to spend time together outdoors without getting sick. The riots reconstructed an outside of the home as they enacted an outside of capitalist social relations. Before the riots, even before the pandemic, it often felt as if life stopped just before the point where other people began.

The opening of the outside was an accidental effect of the uprisings. Although the uprisings were a mourning practice, a riot is also the undirected intersubjective power of a crowd, just something that can happen when a lot of people are outside in the same place. By providing new uses for public space—by uprooting street furniture, smashing plate-glass windows into piles of jewels, and pedestrianizing highways—the riots demonstrated that all objects can be transformed by collective play. A riot can't resurrect the dead, but it can resurrect the dead spaces of cities, animate the streets—“*Our streets!*” as the chant goes, a civic-anarchic cliché that makes sense in the moment, as the streets get used differently. The physical sensation of taking a street stays even after the street is reconquered by everyday traffic.

It's important to go outside because you feel different when the weather touches you directly and because there are people there. Social life is the substance that revolution is supposed to work on, so it's no surprise that the brief, disgusting history of the police is founded not only on the slave patrol but also on crowd control. The police exist in passionate opposition to crowds. Unlike riots or an idea of art, the police are filled to the point of obliteration by purpose, so that in the practice of policing they don't act as people at all. They are against escape and against gathering. The streets are the frame and context for working-class social life, so the police limit the pleasures that can be experienced there. Their job is to smash the informal life of the streets in all its manifestations: street vending, loitering, all the nothing crimes that hurt no one through which the police project of racist harassment gives itself legal form. Mohamed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation was the spark that began the Arab Spring, was a street vendor; Eric Garner was a street vendor. The banning of loitering is similarly paradigmatic, as it potentially criminalizes being anywhere at all.

# 1 — Meditations on Wildflowers

things, anything,  
outside not inside,  
d in my memory—or  
l that haunting, invisible  
part of our being—and wherever  
ars, in New York City in particular,  
igolds, portulaca, herbs for cooking,  
ll other things that were familiar to  
of my mother, the

Your home,  
the place you  
are from, is  
always Eden, [the  
place where even imperfections were  
perfect, and everything that

## *Request\_v5*

Does anyone have a diamond?

(MMORPG)

## *Request\_v4*

Hey, on your way home, can you grab a  
diamond for me?

(Mines, mines, mines)

## *Request\_v3*

Madam, I am writing with what is  
admittedly an unusual request.

(Queen Elizabeth II's jewels)

## *Request\_v2*

I'm writing to request a diamond.

(Top diamond suppliers)

If it is not an inconvenience, I'm hoping that  
you will consider giving one to me.

At present, I would be grateful for any type  
of diamond.

## *Request\_v1*

I would like a diamond.

(Craigslist listing)

I would like it to be given to me.

(Responses so far...)

I prefer a round cut VVS colorless diamond  
that's at least one carat, but I'm open to any  
type of diamond.

(Amazon Wish List)

I don't have a preference of any type of  
jewelry—I just would like a diamond and for  
it to be given to me.

Note: I do not have access to a printer at this time. If you would like a physical copy of the Queen. If you have a printer and stationery, please let me know and I can send you a PDF!

Madam,

First, I'd like to express my sorrow upon your diagnosis. I am sure you have the best care possible and I wish him a speedy recovery.

I am writing to you with what is admitt

I am a graduate student at Rhode Island College working on my thesis research on the cultural value of diamonds. I am interested in the symbolism that diamonds hold and the personal stories people have with diamonds. Although there are many studies on diamonds, I have found that an important part of my research is to speak with people in person. As jewelry businesses and collectors have closed in recent months due to the pandemic, I have not been able to go out and speak with people about their jewelry.

From my interest and research into the Queen's Jewelry, I have learned that Your Majesty owns many beautiful and valuable pieces. The reason for my letter is to humbly request if it is possible to borrow one diamond you may have—to borrow for my thesis research. If this is not possible, I would appreciate any other resources that may be available.

Thank you in advance for your help. Please let me know if you have any questions.

I have the honor to be, Madam, Your Majesty's most humble servant.

From: Foxyy108  
Fri, Mar 27, 9:09 AM

You want a diamond ring for  
FREE???????

Is the personal collection of  
Leslie Field Harry N Abrams

From: rbert321  
Mon, Mar 23, 2:45 AM

If you get off your fat, lazy, pimpley,  
pathetic ass and work, you wouldn't  
have to beg on craigslist for diamonds.

*Sent via the Samsung Galaxy Note8, an AT&T  
5G Evolution capable smartphone*

oping that  
any type

diamond  
en to any



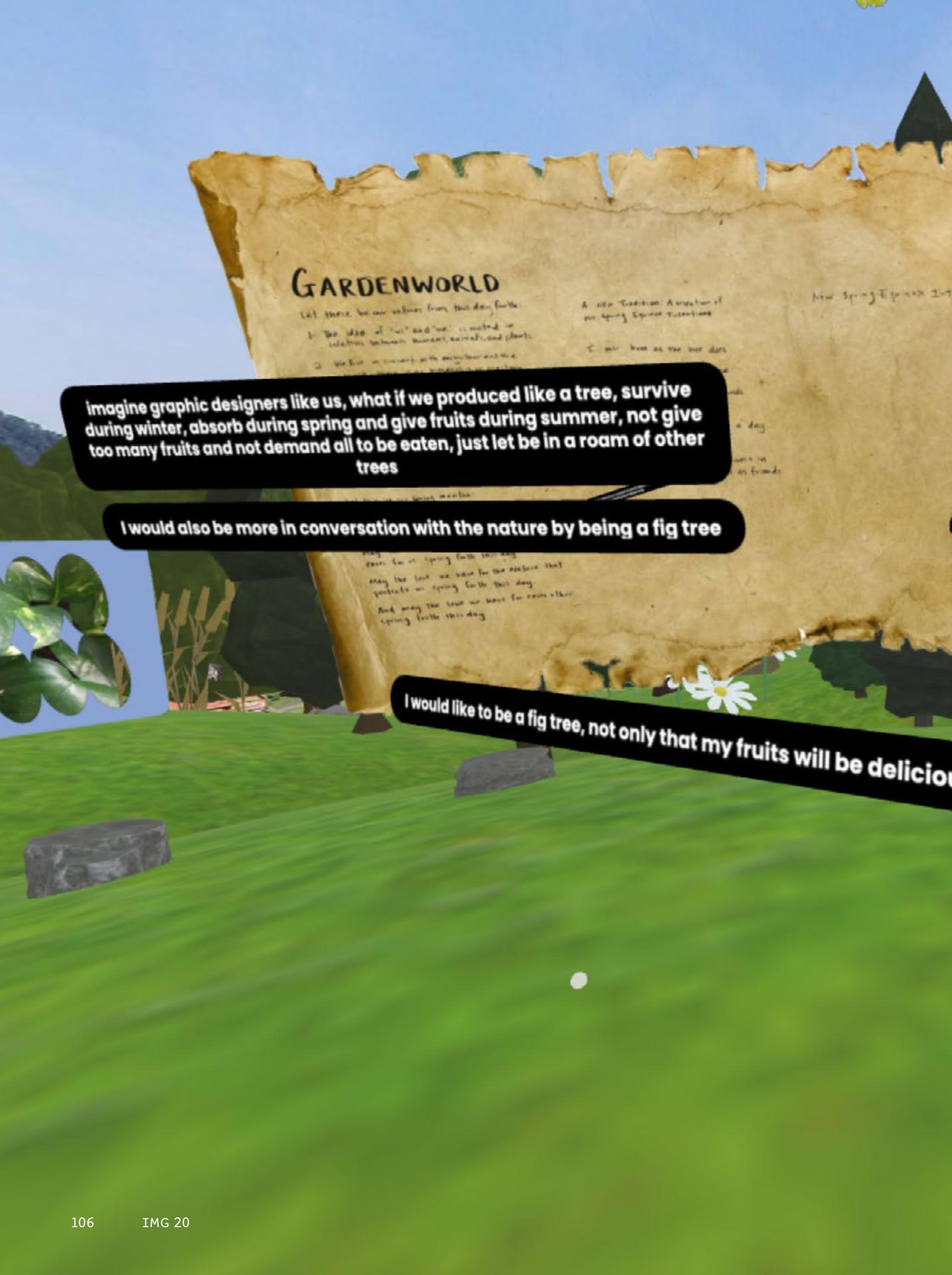
104

IMG 18



IMG 19

105



Meticulous Drawing Tools X +

Not Secure | click2draw.glitch.me/color.html

Color palette interface showing a grid of color swatches, a color wheel, and RGB sliders. The color wheel shows a gradient from blue to red. The RGB sliders are set to R: 82, G: 94, B: 137.

Meticulous Drawing Tools

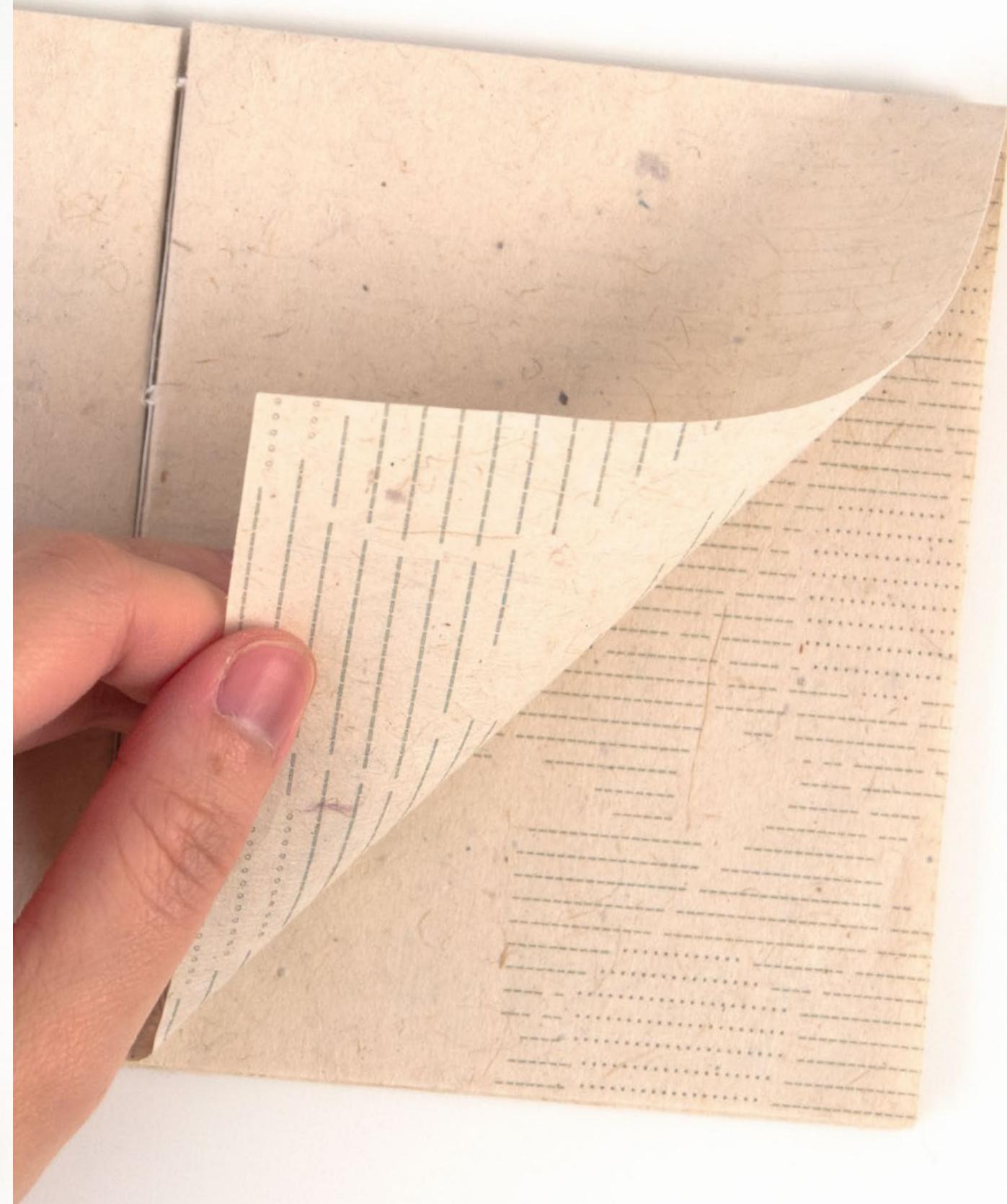
Checkbox Radio Color Slider Dropdown

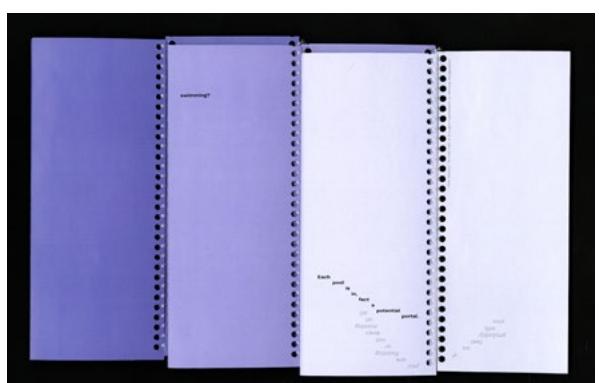
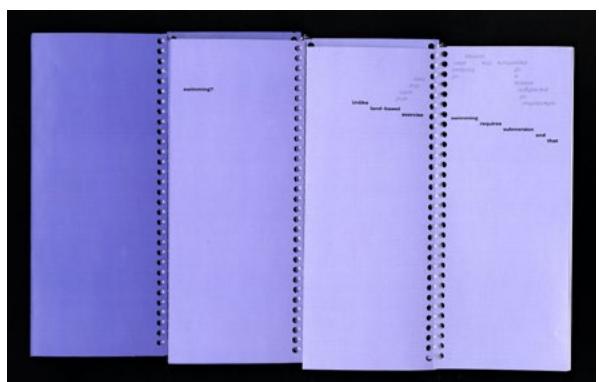
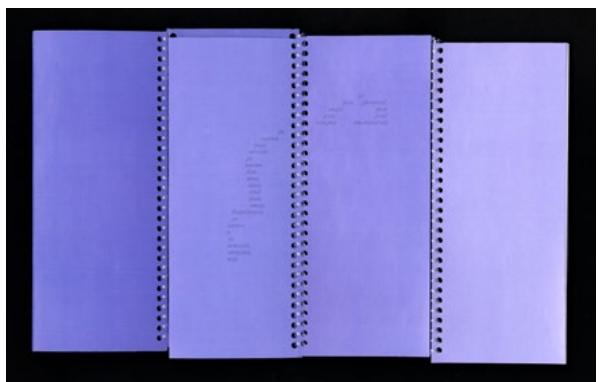
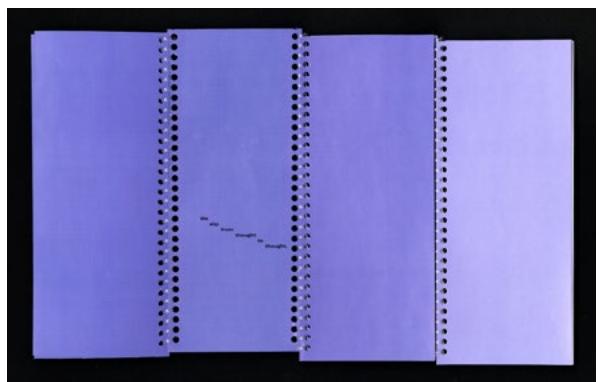
Agr. 16a

I no  
longer  
want to  
work so hard. I'd  
like to stay at home a  
little, be calm... At  
my age every  
minute  
is more or  
less the last  
minute. I feel  
it very strongly.

I  
should  
enjoy  
what is here.  
Every seeing the tulips  
aging, I love that.  
The more you wait  
they become  
very bizarre.  
I love to see things  
getting to be

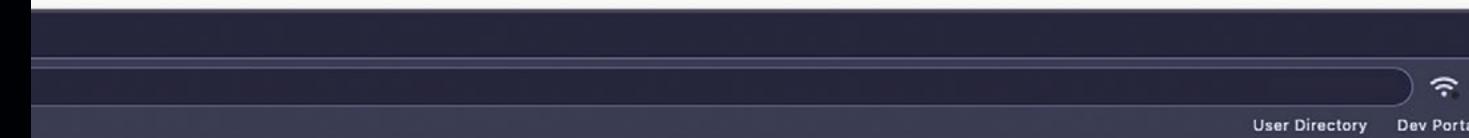
naturally.  
vaguely  
destroyed





and  
then  
there's  
a  
**momentary**  
nothing-  
ness.

as  
you  
are  
falling  
your  
sense  
of  
orientation  
may  
start  
to  
play  
additional  
roles  
on  
you



*SPEAK  
PEER  
AND  
ENTER*

To call up a part for all peers, preface the following commands with 'peer'. To call up for yourself only, preface with 'self'.

## EXAMPLE:

**peer reveal contributions** [Calls up Contributions section for all peers]

**self reveal contributions** [Calls up Contributions section for yourself only]

## BRING UP CONTRIBUTIONS

**reveal contributions**

## OPEN A CONTRIBUTION LINK

**enter contribution [#]**

## BRING UP HYPERTEXTS

**reveal hypertexts**

## OPEN A HYPERTEXT LINK

**enter hypertext [#]**

## BRING UP CODE

**reveal code**

## BRING UP PEER GROUP

**reveal peergroup**

## CLEAR ALL SECTIONS OFF SCREEN

**timeout**

You said: peer reveal contributions

You said: peer enter contribution 0002

You said: peer enter contribution 00002

You said: peer timeout

You said: peer reveal peergroup

Speak unto the hypercommons. Type 'common aid' for command list.

## PEER GROUP

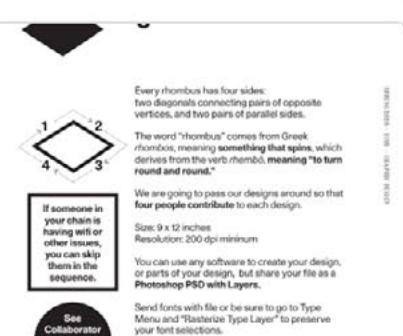
PEER NAME	DUTY
KIT	ACTING HOST, PEER
DAPHNE	ACTING KEEPER, HOST, PEER
WILL	HOST, PEER
LAI	HOST, PEER



**PDF** 2020\_Grad\_Thesis\_1\_Sy...



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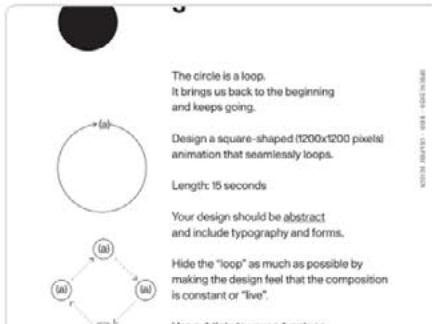
Betheny Johns and Lucinda Hitchcock // 2020  
RISD GD // Great Studio 2 MODES OF DISCOURSE  
GRAPH-3245-01 CIT 502 Tuesdays 1:10pm–6:10pm

18 February 2020  
Project 1, Phase 1: ON THIS DAY



Betheny Johns and Lucinda Hitchcock // 2020  
RISD GD // Great Studio 2 MODES OF DISCOURSE  
GRAPH-3245-01 CIT 502 Tuesdays 1:10pm–6:10pm

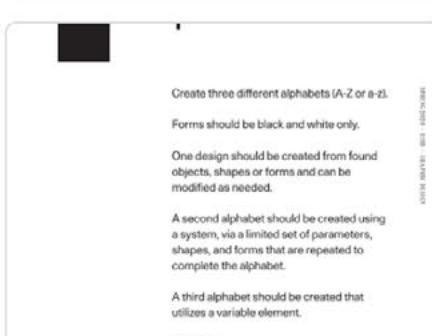
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Project 1, Phase 2: ON THIS DAY



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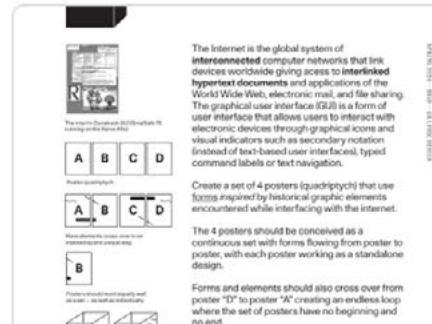
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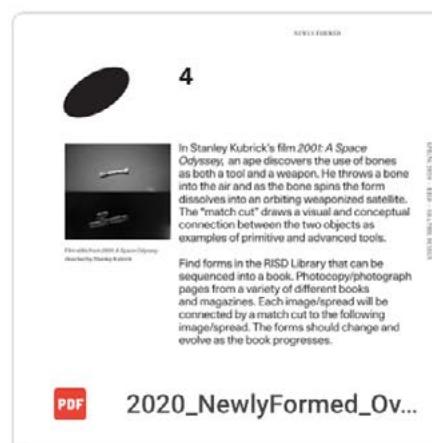
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RISD GD // Great Studio 2 MODES OF DISCOURSE  
GRAPH-3245-01 CIT 502 Tuesdays 1:10pm–6:10pm

18 February 2020  
Project 1, Phase 2: ON THIS DAY



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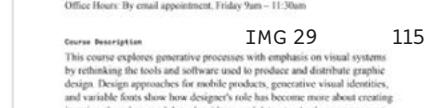
**PDF** 2020\_NewlyFormed\_Ov...



**PDF** 2020\_NewlyFormed\_Sy...

Betheny Johns and Lucinda Hitchcock // 2020  
RISD GD // Great Studio 2 MODES OF DISCOURSE  
GRAPH-3245-01 CIT 502 Tuesdays 1:10pm–6:10pm

18 February 2020  
Project 1, Phase 2: ON THIS DAY



The Internet is the global system of interconnected computer networks that allows users worldwide giving access to interlinked hypertext documents and applications of the World Wide Web, electronic mail, and file sharing. The graphical user interface (GUI) is a form of user interface that allows to interact with electronic devices through graphical elements and visual indicators such as secondary notation (instead of text-based user interfaces), typical command labels or text navigation.

Create a set of 4 posters (quadriptych) that use forms inspired by historical graphic elements encountered while interfacing with the internet.

The 4 posters should be conceived as a continuous set with forms flowing from poster to poster, with each poster working as a standalone design.

Forms and elements should also cross over from poster "D" to poster "A" creating an endless loop where the set of posters have no beginning and no end.

Use text (min. 10 words) from this site:

**PDF** 2020\_NewlyFormed\_Cu...



**PDF** 2020\_NewlyFormed\_Ov...



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This course explores generative processes with emphasis on visual systems by refocusing the tools and software used to produce and distribute graphic design. Design approaches for mobile products, generative visual identities, and variable fonts show how designer's role has become more about creating iterations based on modules, algorithms, and datasets. As these components

INTERACTIVE DESIGN

NEW FORMS

NEW FORMS

BERNARD KUBRICK

# What makes graphic design accessible<sup>1</sup>?

1 Accessible as  
in: inviting, inclusive,  
obtainable, shareable,  
approachable

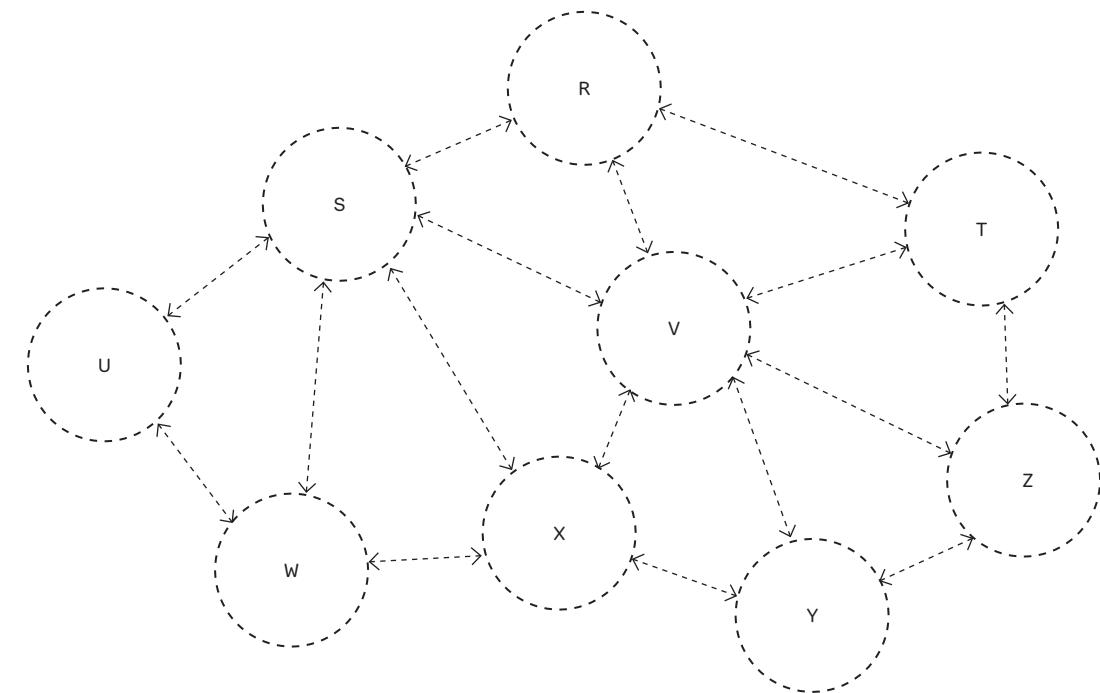


FIG. 11—ACCESS DISTRIBUTED AND SHARED AMONG A NETWORK

## ESSAY

- 3.1 OVERVIEW
- 3.2 UNIVERSALITY VS. SPECIFICITY
- 3.3 THE INTIMATE MADE PUBLIC
- 3.4 DISTRIBUTION AND CIRCULATION
- 3.5 THE CONDITIONS OF ACCESS
- 3.6 ACCESS THROUGH REDISTRIBUTION

## PROJECTS

- H HOW TO GET A DIAMOND
- I FURIES
- J GARDENWORLD
- K METICULOUS DRAWING TOOLS
- L A BOOK THAT GROWS: GARDEN & SUBMERSION READERS
- M PEER, PEER, PEER, AND PEER
- N DESIGN SCHOOL BRIEFS

## 3.1

## 3.1 - 3.2.1

Accessible for whom? What is the relationship between access and inclusion? →3.2 How is access to information enabled or suppressed? What gaps or leaks exist to make that information accessible? →3.3 How does distribution facilitate access? →3.4 How do people mediate access for each other? →3.5 →3.6

In this section, I start with form, questioning the idea of universality as the default for accessibility, asking who decides what is “universal,” who is included and who is left out →3.2. I move to concept and content, arguing for engagement with the everyday and intimate as ways to access more complex ideas →3.3. Then, I explore how modes of distribution and circulation—of books by small presses, specifically—shape access to information and knowledge →3.4. However, access can come with a price, as with personal privacy on the internet. Access here is conditional →3.5. Finally, I revisit circulation to investigate how to redistribute access from an institutional position to a wider audience →3.6.

### 3.2.1 UNIVERSALITY VS. SPECIFICITY

One challenge of graphic design is to express ideas quickly and efficiently to as broad of an audience as possible. The goal is to reach a universal form of visual communication. Universality can be mistaken for accessibility, especially if the framework for “universality” is defined, as it often is in graphic design, by a white heteropatriarchal point of view.

An example: The International System of Typographic Picture Education, or Isotype, is a set of pictorial icons developed in the early 1920s as a form of a universal language. Otto Neurath, a Viennese philosopher and co-creator of Isotype, describes the system as “pictures whose details are clear for everybody, are free from the limits of language: they are international.”<sup>1</sup> Isotype graphics were used in information design with the intention of making the data easier to understand, representing greater quantities by using more graphics instead of comparing quantity by size. On face value, the use of pictorial representations may make information more accessible across educational backgrounds and language barriers. Digging deeper, Ruben Pater notes in

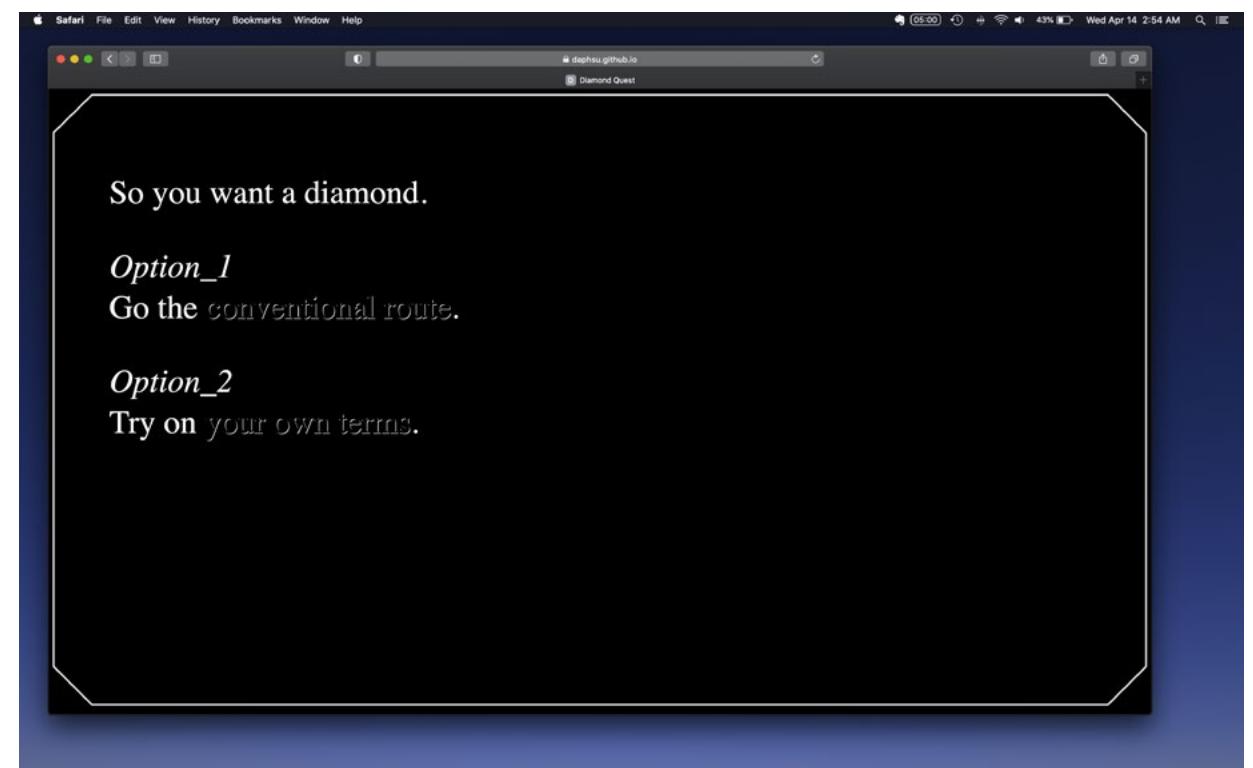
<sup>1</sup> Ruben Pater, “Words Divide, Pictures Unite,” in *The Politics of Design*, researched by Asja Keeman (Amsterdam, Netherlands: BIS Publishers, 2016), 130.

### PROJECT H HOW TO GET A DIAMOND

This project begins with the diamond ring: a symbol of luxury, wealth, and love—meanings that persist alongside competing associations of ecological extraction and violent labor practices. A diamond ring is “earned,” either by accumulating the wealth to buy one or by capturing some else’s love and devotion for long enough to be proposed to. I rejected this latter mode of receiving a diamond ring, instead asking what it would take to get one for free, no strings attached. How did the diamond ring take on these cultural meanings?

What started as a lighthearted list of all the ways to get a diamond (“Get on someone’s will to inherit their diamond(s). Be prepared for the long game and also loss,” “Go on *The Bachelor*. Make him fall in love with me,” “Bring a metal detector to the beach”) turned into a near-obsessive search. The methods of procurement are tracked, list-style, through a web blog. Inspired by artist Jill Magid’s work in which she takes on different identities in order to be heard by authority figures, I developed

Readers land on a page with two choices. Clicking on option 1 brings up an old diamond ring ad. Clicking on option 2 leads to the documentation of Dee Diamond’s search for a free ring.

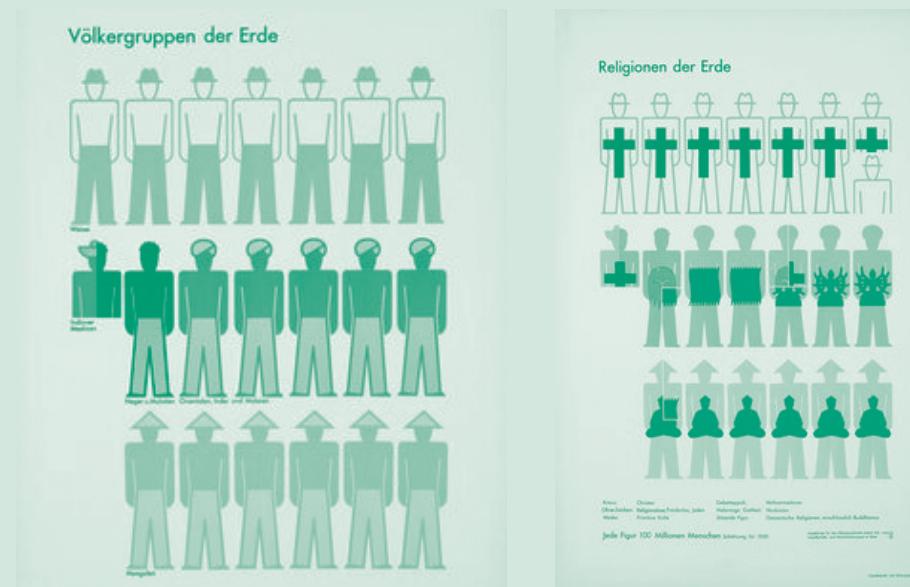


*The Politics of Design*, that Isotype was created during a peak period of European colonialism, meaning “they represented European colonial standards. In the visual examples non-European countries are grouped and categorized as ‘other.’”<sup>2</sup> Charts titled “The world’s ethnicities” and “The world’s religions” dilute different ethnicities and nationalities into a handful of generalized races, rendered in darker colors and traditional attire. Drawn from a Western point of view under the assumption of being “objective” or “neutral,” the Isotype graphics flatten and otherize the representation of non-white people. Stereotypes are visually reproduced and circulated. These representations exemplify how design, by replicating cultural biases under the guise of universality or accessibility, becomes a tool of exclusion.

### 3.2.2

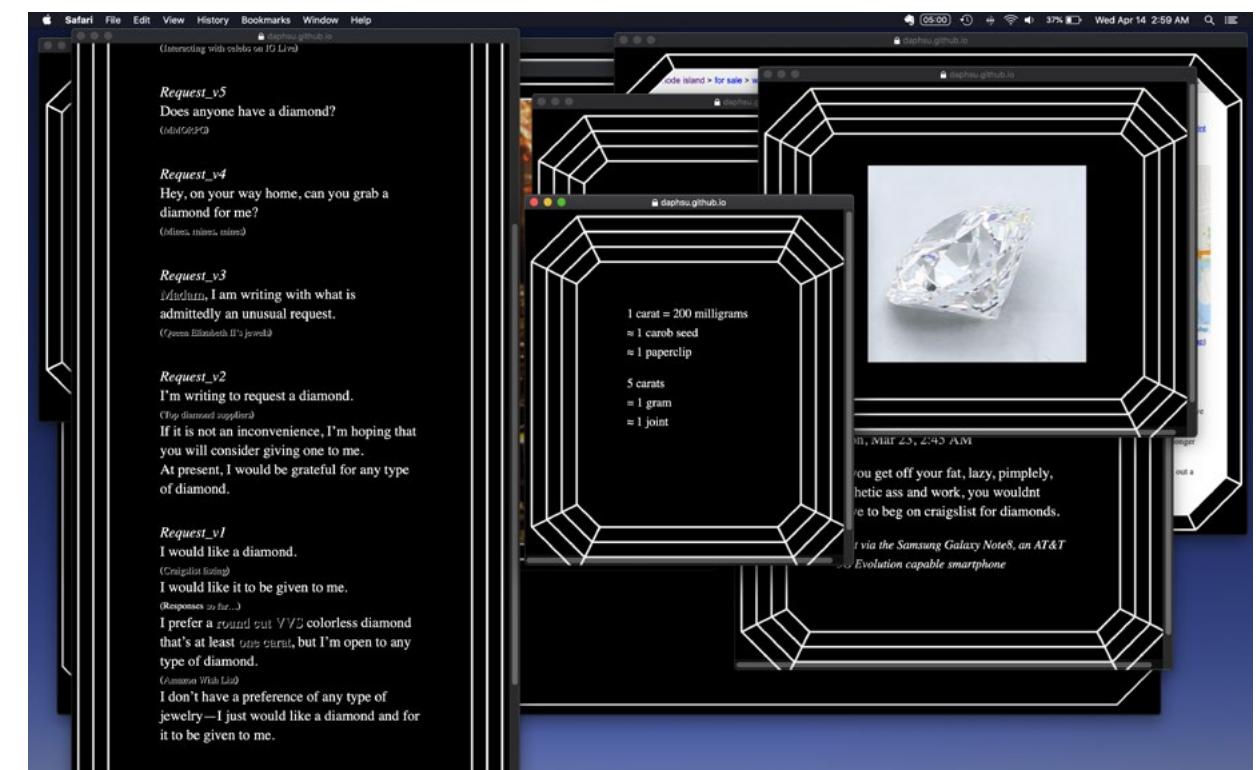
The other effect of the circulation of stereotyped representations of ethnic groups is that they become so familiar to the point of widespread adoption, as in the case of commercial signage. Driving through almost any town in the US, you will likely see the name of a Chinese

Isotype visualization titled “The world’s ethnicities” (left) and “The world’s religions” (right). In an attempt to simplify and use graphics as a “universal language,” they show stereotyped depictions of non-white ethnic groups.



an alter ego, Dee Diamonds. Dee is a chameleon, and a bit ruthless. She documents all her attempts to acquire a diamond on her own terms, whether posting her emailed requests to distributors and interactions on Craigslist or streaming her probes into divorce forums and mine locales. These attempts are tracked through a list of the types of requests Dee sends out. In the first round of tries, Dee starts and Amazon Wish List and posts on Craigslist. The replies are judgmental and unsavory, but expected. “If you get off your fat, lazy, pimpley, pathetic ass and work, you wouldn’t have to beg on Craigslist for diamonds,” wrote rbert321. Under requests two and three, Dee adopts a formal tone, writing to diamond suppliers and the Queen of England to ask them to lend her, a graduate student, a diamond for research. Dee spends her evenings probing around diamond mines on Google Earth and perusing divorce forums of people looking to sell their rings. Through layers of pop-up windows, readers follow her quest, which slowly reveals the cloudy history and constructed value of the diamond industry.

The list on the left outlines all the ways Dee tries to acquire a diamond ring. Clicking on any of the links in that list opens up more pop-up windows. The first few windows explain the type of diamond she’s looking for. Next page: Later windows document further attempts.



Safari File Edit View History Bookmarks Window Help

daphsu.github.io

Request\_v8 (in progress)  
I'll make one myself.

Request\_v7 (in progress)  
I'll get one myself.

Request\_v6 (in progress)  
Your diamond is so pretty. Can I have it? or I can take that dreaded ring off your hands, no strings attached.  
(Interacting with celebs on IG Live)

Request\_v5  
Does anyone have a diamond?  
(MMORPG)

instructables.com

Circuits Workshop Craft Cooking Living Outside Teachers

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## How to Make a Synthetic Diamond

By mrcrumley in Workshop > Science 1,478,726 427 404 Featured

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diamond ring

Search results in r/Divorce

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Former Jewel Thief Reviews Famous Heist Movies, From 'Ocean's Eleven' to 'Heat'  
9,596,466 views • Nov 7, 2019

219K 3.8K SHARE SAVE ...

versus Superstitious- Torn about using old stone(s) for new engagement ring Life After Divorce

+ Posted by u/urbanista12 2 months ago

5 Comments Share Save ...

ment and Wedding Rings Vent/Rant/FML

+ Posted by u/Noosh3201 4 months ago

18 Comments Share Save ...

What do you do with wedding rings? Life After Divorce

+ Posted by u/bertab1234 5 months ago

12 Comments Share Save ...

What do you do with your old rings? Life After Divorce

+ Posted by u/ToesocksandFlipflops 4 months ago

12 Comments Share Save ...

Do people still wear their e-ring post divorce? What did you do with your engagement rings? Life After Divorce

daphsu.github.io

youtube.com

SIGN IN

restaurant set in a brush typeface or a tropical-themed bar with a sign of letters made out of bamboo. In "Typecast," Sojin Kim and Somi Kim trace the history of these typefaces, which they found were initially drawn as shorthand for anything foreign rather than appropriating specific cultural references. "While initially springing from the Western designer's view of the 'other,'" they write, "these typographic forms have been appropriated by the increasing number of immigrant-owned businesses and used as self-representation in the commercial realm to render the various groups easily recognizable to appeal to the American appetite for the exotic."<sup>1</sup> The historical visual

<sup>1</sup> Sojin Kim and Somi Kim, "Typecast: meaning, culture, and identity in the alphabet omelet (which came first?)" in *Lift and Separate: Graphic Design and the Vernacular*, ed. Barbara Glauber (New York: Herb Lubalin Study Center, 1993), 34.

vocabulary in the US—from restaurant signs to movie posters—uses these typefaces with "foreign" flourishes to denote different ethnic groups. These signifiers are so prevalent that they've become expected by consumers, even markers of authenticity.

The authors of the article draw a parallel to the chop suey, a Chinese-American stir fry dish invented to appeal to the American palate while seeming Chinese. While nowhere near close to being culturally "authentic," the signage used for businesses, like Chinese restaurants or tiki bars, make them more accessible to American audiences by appearing familiarly foreign. The "other" becomes more accessible through caricature. At the same time, to appeal to white audiences, their visual vocabulary is employed by business proprietors themselves.

### 3.2.3

Fresh out of my undergraduate design program at one of my first jobs, I was tasked with redrawing a map of a museum for a new Visitor's Guide. To indicate the public bathrooms, I used a figure with round shoulders and rectangle legs and a figure in the shape of a triangle to symbolize "man" and "woman;" these figures were developed in the 1970s by the American Institute for Graphic Arts for the US Department of Transportation.<sup>1</sup> The assistant curator at the time popped into the graphic design office and saw the working file of the map over my shoulder. She questioned

<sup>1</sup> Sonner Kehrt, "How the Universal Symbols for Escalators, Restrooms, and Transport Were Designed," *Atlas Obscura*, December, 10, 2015, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/how-the-universal-symbols-for-escalators-restrooms-and-transport-were-designed>.



Examples of "exotic" typefaces included in Kim and Kim's essay as seen on Los Angeles commercial strip mall signs.

### PROJECT I FURIES

How do different people experience shared space, both public and private? How is emotion an organizing force?

There's the official narrative that people in power peddle about their city, their company, their property. Then there's the lived experiences of the city's many residents, the company's employees, and the property's inhabitants. The mayor promises jobs and housing but prioritizes the interests of rich developers over the needs of poor citizens. A corporate director preaches workplace fairness yet seems untouched by reports of pay inequality and favoritism. A landlord is quick to charge penalties on late rent payments, then disappears when the heater breaks or the ceiling leaks.

Official narratives can be so strong that any experiences to the contrary seem like aberrations, solely in one's head. Complaints fall on uncaring ears. A painful decision must be made to save face. But the anger continues to simmer.

A protested location on this site includes an image of its facade and a running tally of grievances in the right sidebar. Click anywhere to throw tomatoes.

xd.adobe.com

ENTER ZIP CODE: 02903

YOU'VE THROWN 5 TOMATOES!

Keep going! Every day, we send an image of a splat-filled building facade to this apartment landlord until the tenants' utilities are permanently fixed.

LOCATION: 32 CUSTOM HOUSE ST., PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903

TODAY (LAST THREW 1 DAY AGO): 5 TOMATOES THROWN, 1 UNIQUE VISITOR

ALL TIME: 22 TOMATOES THROWN, 3 UNIQUE VISITORS

POSTED 2 DAYS AGO

WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE? Heat and hot water have been off for a week after HVAC unit broke due to hacked-together plumbing system.

The landlord is painstakingly slow and responding to service requests and is opaque in their communication. We want our permanent fix for our utilities, more transparency, and rent reimbursement for the days the heat has been off.

ADD YOUR VOICE

I hear you. It took 3 months for our washing machine to get fixed. The landlord got mad at us for getting mad at them about it.

POSTED 1 DAY AGO

I can't afford the rent even though downtown feels mostly empty. The rate doesn't match the value. It's so frustrating I to break my lease.

POSTED 2 DAYS AGO

LESS INFORMATION

the use of these symbols, asking if there was a non-gendered way to label the bathrooms. We landed on an icon of a toilet. A few years later, the museum reconfigured their facilities to make all the bathrooms gender inclusive. A *New York Times* article from 2015 documented a nationwide shift in bathroom signage as more cities passed laws requiring single-use all-gender public restrooms.<sup>2</sup>

The conversation of identity representation in graphic form comes up with emojis, too. Texters have more and more options to customize the little pictograms built into their phone keyboards; emojis of humans include a palette of skin colors and gender presentations. Jennifer Daniel, chair of the Emoji Subcommittee for the Unicode Consortium, describes this as progress through reversing legacy decisions. “Our emoji are moving away from ‘heterosexuals are the default’ to ‘here are two people, here is a family.’”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Aimee Lee Ball, “In All-Gender Restrooms, the Signs Reflect the Times,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/style/transgender-restroom-all-gender.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Daniel, “The past, present and future of the emoji, according to Google’s Jennifer Daniel,” interview by *It’s Nice That, It’s Nice That*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.itsnicethat.com/features/jennifer-daniel-whats-next-for-emojis-preview-of-the-year-2020-illustration-060120>.

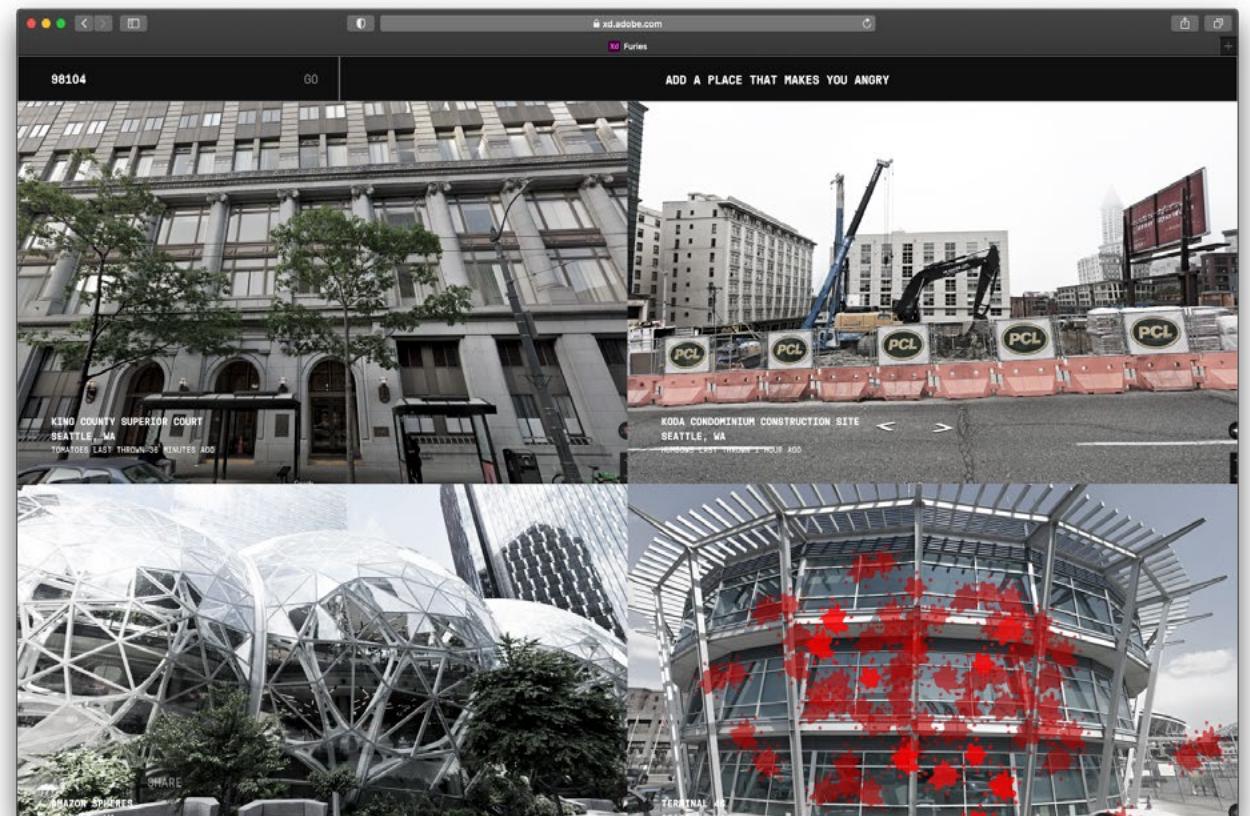
Different graphic and typographic communication strategies for all-gender restroom signage.



This point of friction between official narratives and personal experience is the space explored and elongated by *Furies* (alternatively titled *Little Furies Everywhere*). On this website, anger is validated, visualized, and collectivized through the act of throwing food at building facades that represent greater institutional structures. The action of throwing food as protest has a long history. In 1977, gay activist Thom L. Higgins famously threw a pie in anti-gay rights activist Anita Bryant's face. During the 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests, demonstrators threw eggs at China's liaison office, defacing a Chinese national emblem.

The buildings on this website are places where individuals experience the marginalizing effects of power imbalances and are looking for a place to express anger and find solidarity with others. The buildings are also places where physical protests occur (such as the ICE Building in Seattle, Washington, a symbol of inhumane immigration policies) acting as a digital home for people who can't travel to express support. It's also an archive of acts of protest across a city, documenting the histories of grassroots action outside of official narratives.

Different sites of protest in Seattle, including the Amazon Spheres. Next page: protesting a controversial construction site in a gentrifying neighborhood.



xd.adobe.com

Furies

ENTER ZIP CODE

SEARCH

YOU'VE THROWN 5 HOMBOWS!

Keep going! Every day, we send an image of a splat-filled construction site to the KODA condominiums developers until they agree to suspend construction.

S FIRST ARTWASHING ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

LOCATION  
KODA CONDOMINIUM  
CONSTRUCTION SITE  
SEATTLE, WA  
98104

TODAY (LAST THROWN 2 HOURS AGO)  
56 HOMBOWS THROWN  
13 UNIQUE VISITORS

ALL TIME  
4,206 HOMBOWS THROWN  
366 UNIQUE VISITORS

POSTED 264 DAYS AGO

WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE?  
KODA Condominiums is the first high-rise to go up in the International District and part of a pattern of "upzone" developments that will price out and displace our community's elders, youth, workers, and local businesses.

We want the construction to be suspended and for the city and developers to actually engage with ID residents on equitable, community-led development.

ADD YOUR VOICE

We won't be forced out!!!  
POSTED 3 HOURS AGO

Read "Will Grandma have a place in the new Chinatown-International District" by Cynthia Brothers.  
POSTED 2 DAYS AGO

Luxury development housing like KODA will not solve our

ABOUT SHARE

LESS INFORMATION

< >

Visual norms are not fixed. They shift as dominant assumptions and strategies (white, heterosexual, able-bodied, patriarchal) are challenged by groups marginalized by this culture. Through protest and re-imaginings, graphic representations become more inclusive to intersectional identities.

Inclusion, in the case of the bathroom sign, can signal access to non-binary and transgender people. This is not to laud the “power of graphic design.” Real change occurs on economic and structural levels. When making decisions, not only is it important to challenge the reproduction of visual stereotypes, but to also question who this “representation” ultimately serves. In the case of the all-gender toilet sign, does it benefit the museum audience, or is it a public relations tool for the museum? Is the use of the toilet symbol backed up by the values and actions of the museum? Who makes up the museum staff? Does the museum exhibit work and put on programming by and for non-binary and transgender people? What else is the museum doing to create a safe and inclusive environment for all visitors?

### 3.2.4

What makes graphic design accessible? Embedded within this question is another: for whom? Certain forms and aesthetic decisions may make a symbol or typeface easy to digest for one audience, while homogenizing or excluding another.

Sojin Kim and Somi Kim end their article with a piece of advice: “As the need for multilingual information increases, designers may find it useful to examine and question circulating patterns of cultural representation in all media, the better to read and be read.”<sup>1</sup> Rather than shirking from cultural representation altogether, pushing for specificity and nuance may prove to be more inclusive and even challenge stereotypes.

The work that graphic designer (and my friend) Nicole Ramirez shared during a presentation for my *Intro to Graphic Design* class captures the everyday lived experiences of the communities with and for whom she works.<sup>2</sup> In

<sup>1</sup> Kim and Kim, 34.  
<sup>2</sup> Nicole Ramirez, “Intro to Graphic Design at RISD” (presentation, Rhode Island School of Design, Zoom, January 27, 2020).

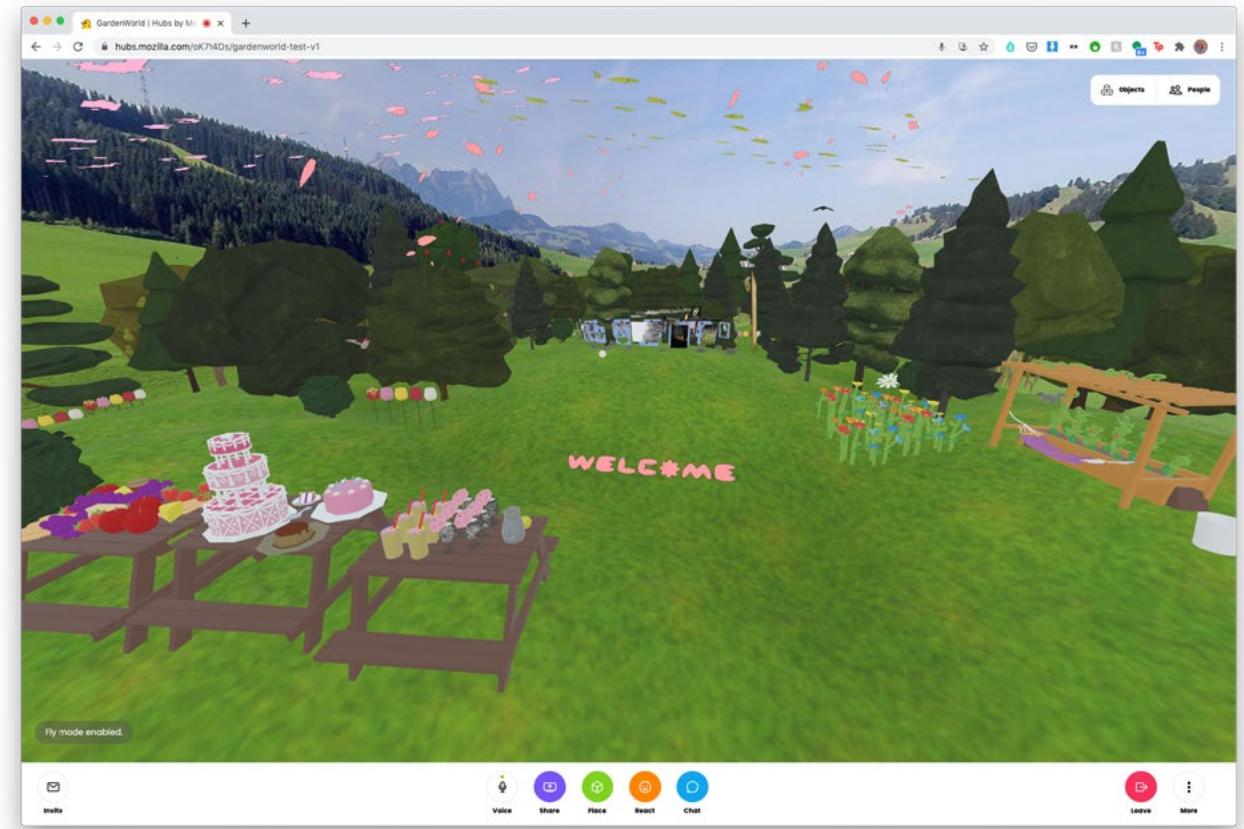
portrait-based posters for a conference held by anti-imperialist Filipino activist alliance Bayan USA, Ramirez made sure to represent both fierceness and joy on the activists’ faces. For a printed report on climate justice research in South

## PROJECT GARDENWORLD

Collaborators: Anastasia Chase, Ryan Diaz

Enter GardenWorld: a parallel universe where humans live in balance with nature. On the eve of Spring Equinox, the annual date when the hours of daytime equal the hours of nighttime, a digital portal between GardenWorld and Earth opens up. Citizens of GardenWorld invite residents of Earth to visit in the forested and mediated space of Mozilla Hubs, where they celebrate the joyous beginning of spring together. Before joining in, residents of Earth are introduced to GardenWorld’s values of reciprocity and care by first being asked to first spend time with nature in their own world. To kick off the celebration, all guests join in a circle to share their observations from their experiences in nature. Their relationships with the environment are further deepened through an intention-setting meditation encouraging balance with the world. During this ritual, attention manifests as an act of offering and a promise.

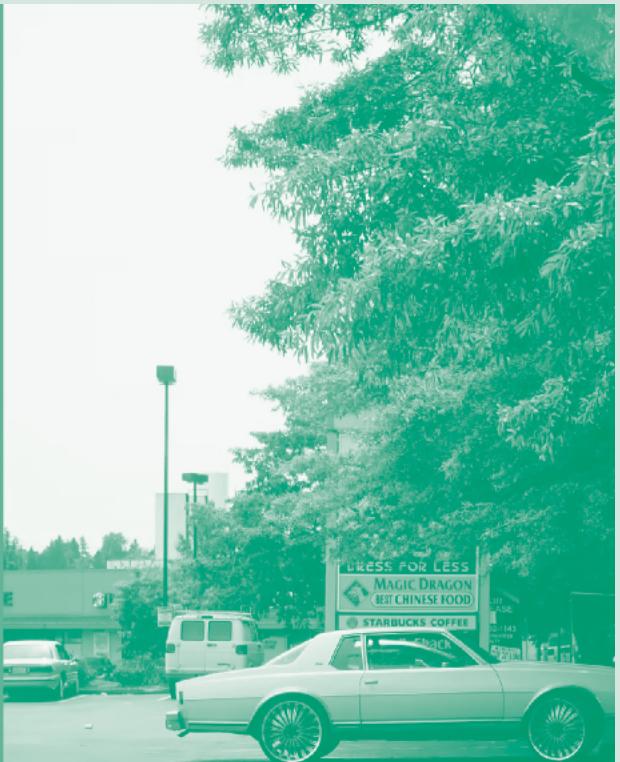
GardenWorld in Mozilla Hubs dressed up with petals and refreshments for the Spring Equinox celebration.



Seattle, a neighborhood historically made up of working class people of color, Ramirez describes a research-based process:

"There's this preconception and misconception that people of color and migrants and working-class communities don't care about the environment. But what they [Got Green, a South Seattle-based grassroots organization for environmental, racial, and economic justice, who conducted the research] found that it's all in the way that it's framed, and all in the way that we talk about climate change. So when you talk about climate change just being about trees and the ocean or the mountains—that didn't resonate within these working class communities. But when you talked about climate change in relation to access to affordable food, access to public transit, clean air and pollution, jobs and employment—that is where people already understood what it meant to fight against climate change. They themselves had already undertaken a lot of sustainability practices, just inherently being

Nicole Ramirez, spreads from *Our People, Our Planet, Our Power*, a report on community-led research about climate change for Got Green, 2016.



Invited guests reading each other's intentions for being more mindful of their relationship and treatment of the natural environment. The blue frames contain the images of nature that guests had taken ahead of the celebration, brought into the space as offerings.



working class and having immigrant backgrounds. For this project, it was very, very important not to show climate change how it's typically shown, so no imagery of trees or mountains or of people hiking or looking at the bounty of America. Rather, we really wanted to show what the environment looks like in these areas, in South Seattle where climate change and pollution and joblessness and lack of access to affordable food become really important. What does that look like specifically for them?"

Ramirez commissioned a friend, a fellow organizer who grew up in that area and had been documenting it through photography. The images featured in the report, which was distributed within Seattle, to other non-profits, and to government officials, show where people live, where people shopped and frequented, and spots within the neighborhood with local significance. The lived-in feel of the photography communicates what it might be like to know South Seattle and reflects the reported findings of the residents' concerns. By questioning familiar depictions of climate change (a Google Image search of the phrase brings up melting ice caps and dry, cracked earth), Ramirez insisted on specificity and nuance, highlighting the multiplicity of experience. Representation and accessibility in this case is defined by the audiences the report seeks to serve.

### 3.3.1 THE INTIMATE MADE PUBLIC

The everyday—mundane moments, bursts of feelings, familiar belongings, local haunts—is a conduit to complex ideas. People, places, and things, nouns instead of pronouns, can bring up rich histories and associations. The invocation of a recognizable subject or shared emotion builds relatability. The specificity of an everyday experience speaks intimately to certain audiences while holding others at a respectful distance.

Telling about the everyday and revealing aspects of private life to the public challenges essentialist narratives. For example, *Minari* is a film about a family's life revealed through everyday moments, which quietly mediates larger conversations about immigration, history, and identity.<sup>1</sup> A young family relocates to Arkansas. A wife trying to support her husband's dreams longs for the community she previously had. The

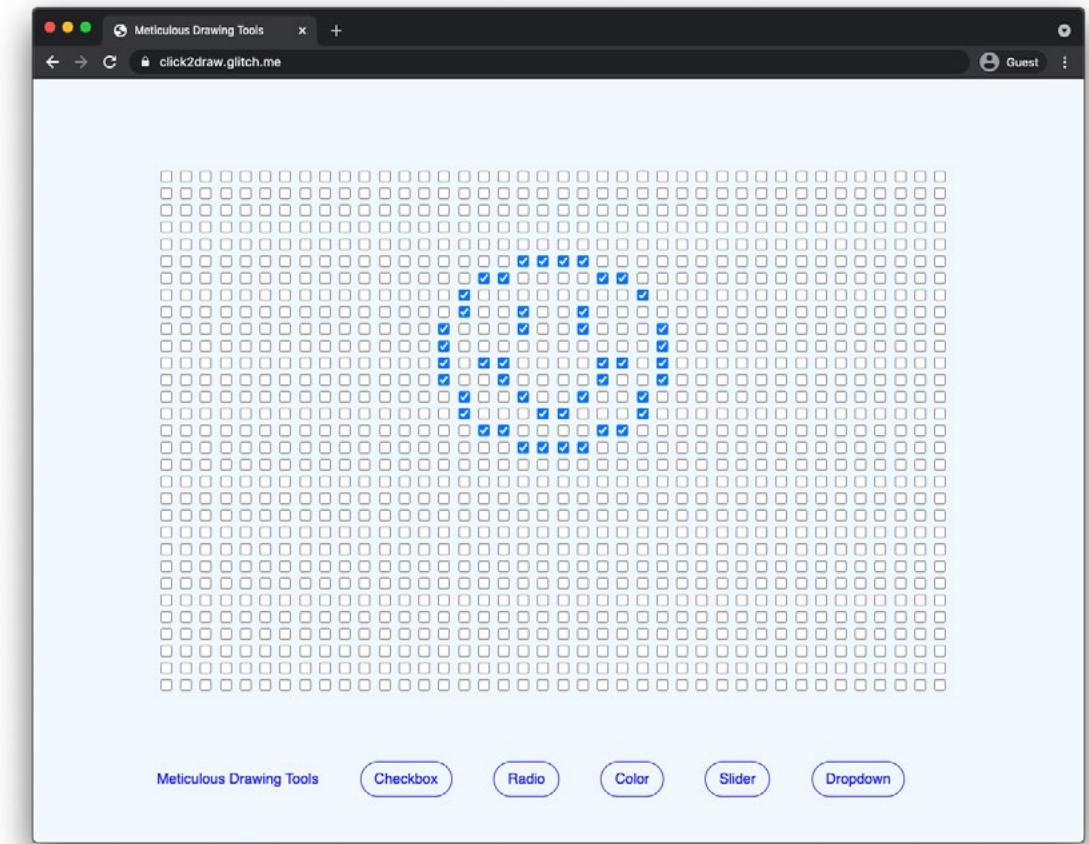
<sup>1</sup> *Minari*, directed by Lee Isaac Chung (2020; A24, 2021), <https://screeningroom.a24films.com/>.

### PROJECT K METICULOUS DRAWING TOOL

Everyday subjects can include default elements, whatever materials I have easy access to, whatever materials are already on hand. HTML, the most basic building block of the Web and the language that defines the structure of a page, contains elements that define how text and other multimedia content like buttons or images appear and function within a browser. Since the early days of the internet, writers and artists pushed the functions of default HTML elements like hyperlinks to create different reading experiences and ways of interacting with the browser.

*Meticulous Drawing Tools* employs arrays of form elements: checkboxes, radio buttons (used for multiple choice questions), color selectors, sliders, and dropdown menus. In the center of the page, the form elements repeat into a grid, like an artboard. The user can select which form element to use from a line of buttons, as if selecting a marking tool from a tool box. As an array, the form elements are

Using checkboxes to draw a smiley face.



## 3.3.1

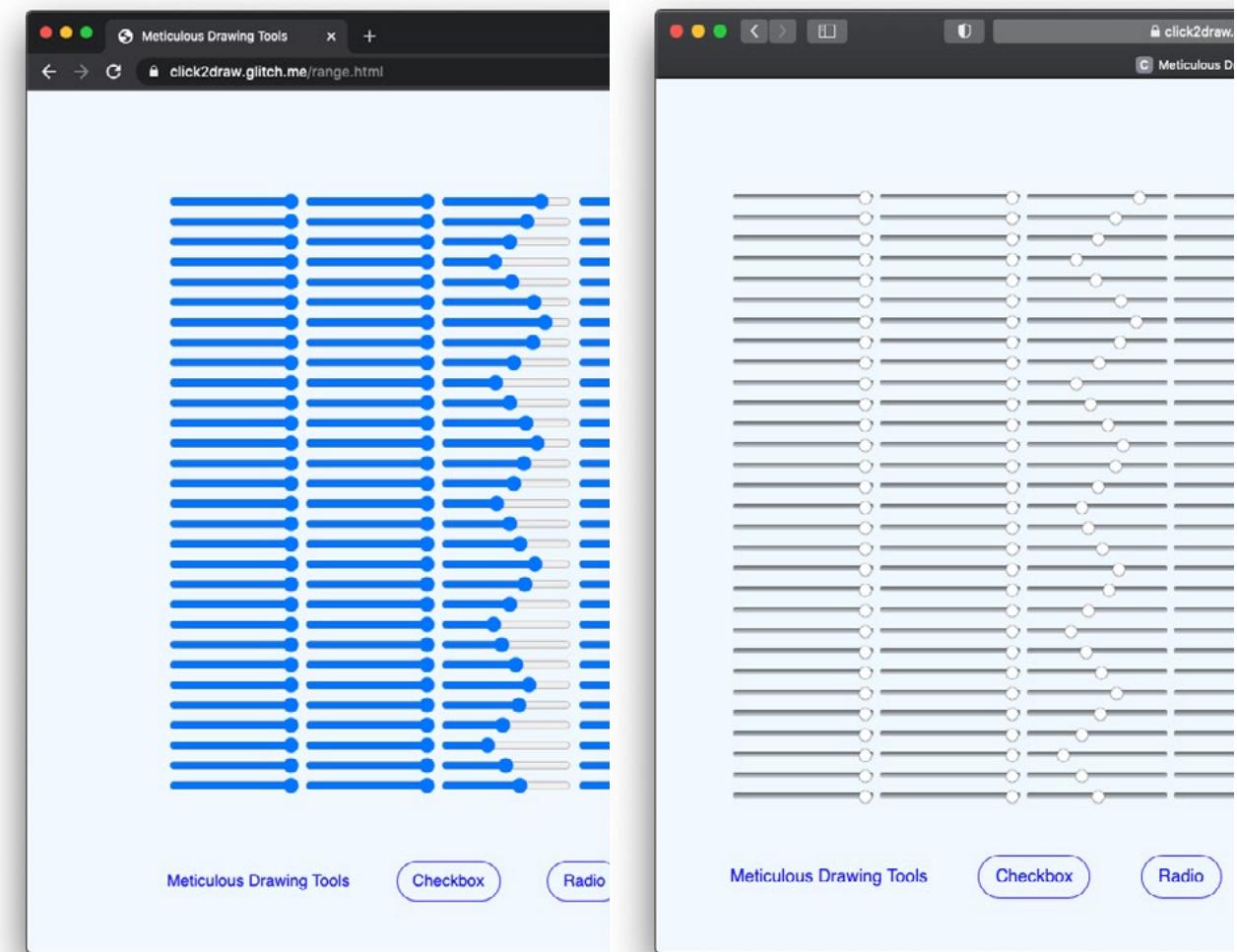
presence of a foreign grandmother challenges the grandson. These moments, if not relatable in the exact details, are significant in feeling. They contain multiple and layered readings. A Korean American family moved from California to rural Arkansas in the 1980s – from a place with immigrant communities and Korean churches to a mostly white area – for the opportunity of self-sufficiency and self-determination. The crass and ebullient grandmother, who “smells like Korea” and doesn’t cook, represents a cultural divide, shattering the boy’s expectations of how a woman of her age should act. The film also exists within an industry in which the stories of people of color, much less immigrants, are rarely told. If they are, they often conform to the myth of the American Dream: immigrant family overcomes poverty and racism, and against all odds, achieves success. *Minari*, named for a leafy green herb, doesn’t try to make an overarching statement about the immigrant experience. It doesn’t try to explain why the wife and husband left Korea in the first place (this is left for knowing viewers to guess based on the time period). Rather, the plot unfolds slowly over a few months, focusing on the shifting relationships between the characters.

A scene between the grandma Soonja and grandson David in *Minari*. David accuses Soonja of not being “a real grandma” because she doesn’t bake cookies, swears, and wears men’s underwear.



divorced from their usual function as buttons that manipulate other content on the page. Instead, they themselves become the content, as the user selects or deselects a checkbox, creating or erasing a mark within the artboard. Each browser (Google Chrome, Safari, Mozilla Firefox) displays these form elements differently, so the experience of the drawing tools remain fluid, changing and updating with technology.

An array of sliders can create patterns. The types of images drawn with these default form tools vary depending on browser. While the blue of the bar is prominent in Google Chrome (left), the round white button controlling the slider takes on greater importance in Safari (right).



The story draws from writer and director Lee Isaac Chung's life. Other immigrants or their children may relate to the small details that Chung includes. (For example, I could understand the boy's confusion and defensiveness in having to live with his Korean grandmother in his American home.) But it is the representation of the everyday and the characters' emotional reactions and relations that give viewers a way into this family's life.

The narrative within *Minari* is one example of the way that the everyday—a snippet from the director's autobiography—can lead conversations about larger themes. Familiar subjects may also be presented in new contexts to prompt reconsideration. Artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres' work places everyday objects and scenes in unexpected places, like a spill of candy in a museum space or an intimate setting on a public billboard. His work is not explicit in its meaning, relying instead on connotations of social issues and identity. *Untitled* (1991) appears to be a mundane photograph of an unmade bed with two pillows. The pillows indent toward the middle, the impressions of use. The photograph is blown up and put on a billboard, overlooking a parking lot in New York City. The placement of this image is significant, writes critic José Esteban Muñoz: "Yet, there is something about the image blown up and relocated in the public sphere that casts a shadow of enigma over the picture."<sup>2</sup> Spectators (Muñoz's

<sup>2</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, "Performing Disidentity: Disidentification as a Practice of Freedom," in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, eds. George Judice, Jean Franco, and Juan Flores (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 170.

term) confused by the image are put in the position of asking what it means. Those in the know—those who know Gonzalez-Torres, a queer Cuban living with AIDS, those affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic—may see "the loss absence, and negation

that blankets queer lives, Latino/a lives, and many other communities at risk or people who share this structure of feeling." The billboard doesn't advertise anything; instead it confronts viewers with an intimate image of loss and grief, restructuring the private in public.

This work is an example of defamiliarization, in which a familiar subject is placed in a different context and seen anew. Depicting an everyday scene, the work seems straightforward and accessible. Its public location demands critical consideration, which may lead a spectator to a place of empathy and, perhaps, perspective shift.

## PROJECT L A BOOK THAT GROWS

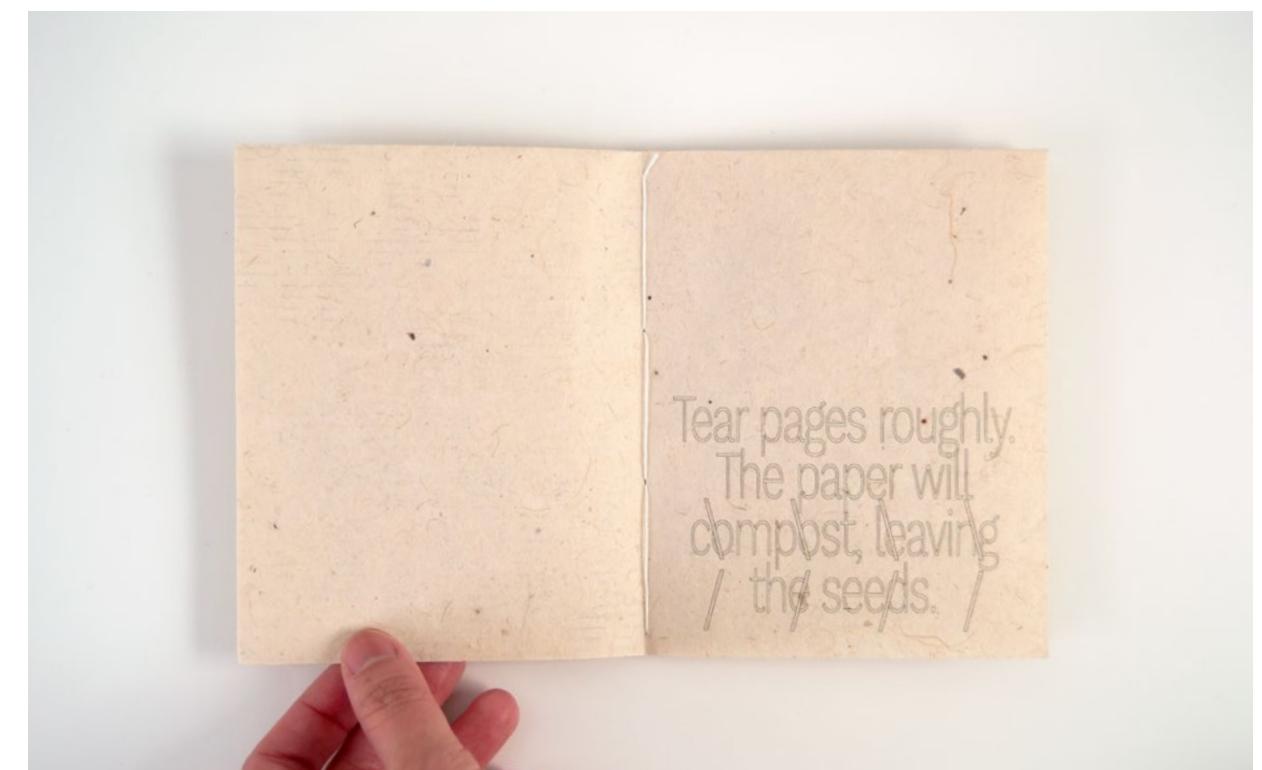
"How to succeed in making a rose that is not my rose, nor his rose, but everybody's rose, i.e. nobody's rose? By placing it within a sequential structure (for example a book), so that it momentarily ceases being a rose and becomes essentially an element of the structure."

—Ulises Carrión<sup>1</sup>

*A Book That Grows* is a series of publications that stretches the book as a medium, where not only does narrative influence the act of reading, but so does the binding and folding of the pages. How the reader turns a page is as much a part of the narrative as the text itself.

Revolving around a theme, each book compiles excerpts from published texts, like a mixtape or a song that built around samples. A reader can start reading a book at any point and jump around, building their own reading experience.

A spread from *Garden Reader* with instructions on what to do with its pages.



## 3.3.1



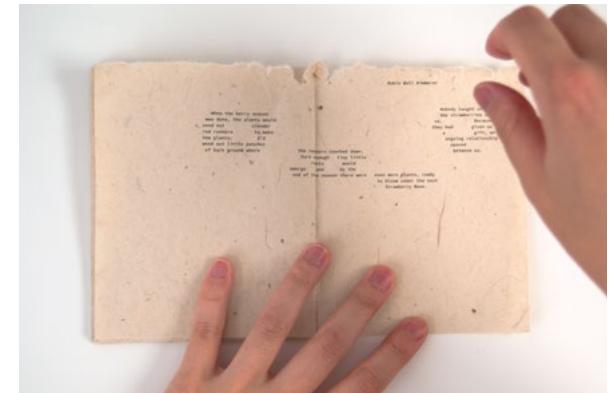
Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *untitled*, 1991. Installation view at 11th Avenue and 38th Street in Manhattan, 2012.

Reading is a social experience—not only an exchange between the text and the reader, but also a conversation among readers. These books take up little space and are meant to be shared and mailed. Distribution is modeled after the potluck-style of zine sharing. Additionally, anyone with access to a printer can replicate a book true to size: the pages of each book can all be printed on 8.5 by 11-inch paper (computer paper size) and folded down.

#### GARDEN READER

Planting is a transformative process. Upon first encounter, the book offers simple instructions on how to plant seeds. Within the pages are other nested messages: the pages are folded at the top, leading the unbound side and the bottom open. Hidden within the folds are more texts. In one fold, director Agnes Varda speaks about the beauty of watching tulips grow and decay. In another, Robin Wall Kimmerer traces her understanding of reciprocity back to observing the life cycles of strawberries. To tear open the pages is to discover a rich repository

Revealing the text inside the folds of *Garden Reader* by tearing it open.



### 3.3.2

In my work, I dig into seemingly commonplace objects, places, and tools and build from observations of daily interpersonal dynamics to tease out underlying stories. The goal is to portal into complex networks of power. This relationship between object and power is explored through *How to Get a Diamond*, investigating the diamond industry through the engagement ring → Project H, and *Furies* → Project I, about power imbalances in official and unofficial narratives. The reconfiguration of known places and tools can also act as a moment of surprise and site of play, which are the subjects of *Meticulous Drawing Tools* → Project K and *Stairwell Games* → Project C, respectively.

### 3.4

#### DISTRIBUTION AND CIRCULATION

Contained within the question “what makes graphic design accessible?” is another question of logistics. “Access” implies a physicality: the ability to enter, to approach, to obtain, to use. Graphic designers not only deal with giving form to content, they also consider methods of distribution and thus methods of access. The ways in which graphic design work circulates depends on the type of distribution and to whom. A *Book That Grows*, for example, investigates the relationship between publishing and distribution → Project F → Project L. The process begins with putting ideas into words, then words onto the pages of a book. A book, reproducible and distributable, makes the ideas accessible (as in readable, if not legible) and public. Readers coalesce around the ideas. Who is this public? It depends on where the books are circulated: through corporatized mainstream currents? A specialized art book fair? The local creative community? And is this community tied to institutional structures, or are they their own niches? Activist spaces? Academic circles? Beyond? In the case of *A Book That Grows*, the books are shared between readers. Martine Syms, artist and founder of Dominica Publishing, says, “You build your audience based on how you’re communicating with them.”<sup>1</sup>

In the 1960s and 70s, conceptual artists attempted to reach a public outside of the art market by creating books. Books, it was

<sup>1</sup> “You Make Publics Around the Ideas”: Martine Syms on Publishing, Self-Help, Zine Culture, and More,” interview by Hannah Ghorashi, ARTnews, April 26, 2019, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/you-make-publics-around-the-ideas-martine-syms-on-publishing-self-help-zine-culture-and-more-6186/>.

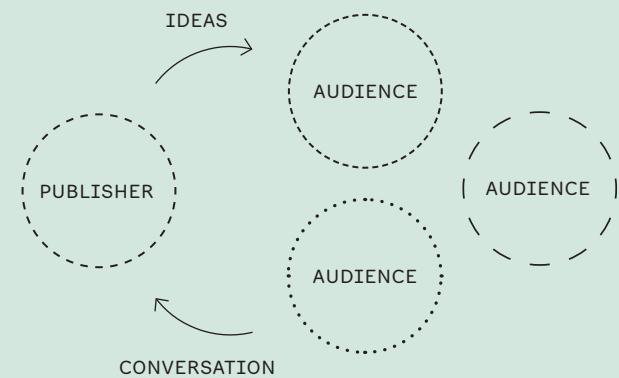


FIG. 12 – MAKING PUBLICS AROUND IDEAS

of writing offering thoughts on cultivation and reciprocity. The act of tearing initiates the transformation of the book. Because the book contains more paper than one person needs for a small garden, the book should be shared and transformed further.

#### SUBMERSION READER

Can the physical interaction with a book feel meditative, even transportive? In this book, two texts play off each other within the pages: in one, by writer Bonnie Tsui, the act of swimming laps induces the feeling of traveling through portals; the portals transport the reader to the disorienting and floating feeling of vertical perspective, as detailed by artist and theoretician Hito Steyerl. These are contained within three books bound together by wire spirals. The type swims back and forth on the pages. The reader methodically flips through the pages of each spiral-bound book to read one text, then flips the book over and rotates it 180° to read the other text. The effect of the page’s stepped color gradient intensifies and de-saturates on and on as the reader goes deeper into the text, then swims back out.

One side of *Submersion Reader*, a book made up of three booklets spiral bound together. Next page: texts can be read both right-side-up and upside-down.



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thought, were inexpensive to make, widely distributable, and more egalitarian than the exclusive spaces of the gallery system. Curator, critic, and artist Lucy Lippard called the artist's book "a portable exhibition ... considered by many the easiest way out of the art world and into the heart of a broader audience."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Amaranth Borsuk, *The Book* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), 135.

There are limits to this idealism. In the introduction to *Artists Who Make Books*, Claire Lehmann complicates this utopian view of the form, detailing the ways the rare-book market vaunt artist's books into art objects. She also cites historian Johanna Drucker, who questions the actual audience of these books: "Where were these masses who supposedly hungered for innovative, original works of portable art in the form of inexpensive multiples?"<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the "masses" doesn't exist, but there's still an audience for creative self-publishing, as seen through the existence of independent bookstores carrying artist's books like Printed Matter in New York and the growth of art book fairs, including the new Seattle Art Book Fair (discussed further in with Jayme Yen and Tom Eykemans →Interview 3).

The people whose work is supported by such bookstores and fairs carry forward the belief in the book as a democratic multiple. On a presentation slide titled "Why books?" editor Vivian Sming answers her question with more questions, outlining the concerns of her press, Sming Sming Books: "Who makes art accessible? ... Can we make art that takes up as little space as possible, but emanates, reverberates, and is still felt profoundly throughout the world? Where does art reside?"<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Claire Lehmann, introduction to *Artists Who Make Books*, eds. Andrew Roth, Philip E. Aarons, and Claire Lehmann (London; New York: Phaidon, 2017), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Kandis Williams, Vivian Sming, and Jessica Lynne, panelists, "Points of Access: Publishing," panel discussion, California African American Museum, Zoom, June 10, 2020.

Sming alludes to the size of books, which can be shelved or carried around in a bag while containing big ideas. Books also transcend time in their ability to be picked up again by readers in the future. The ideas, inscribed on the page, travel far.

Independent presses as well as zine-makers deal intimately with distribution and audience. People who engage with these forms of publishing control their own means of communication. This fact was especially important for Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, founded in 1980 by women of color who could not find any other space to publish their writing.<sup>5</sup> The press produced both activist and literary work that "consciously examine, from

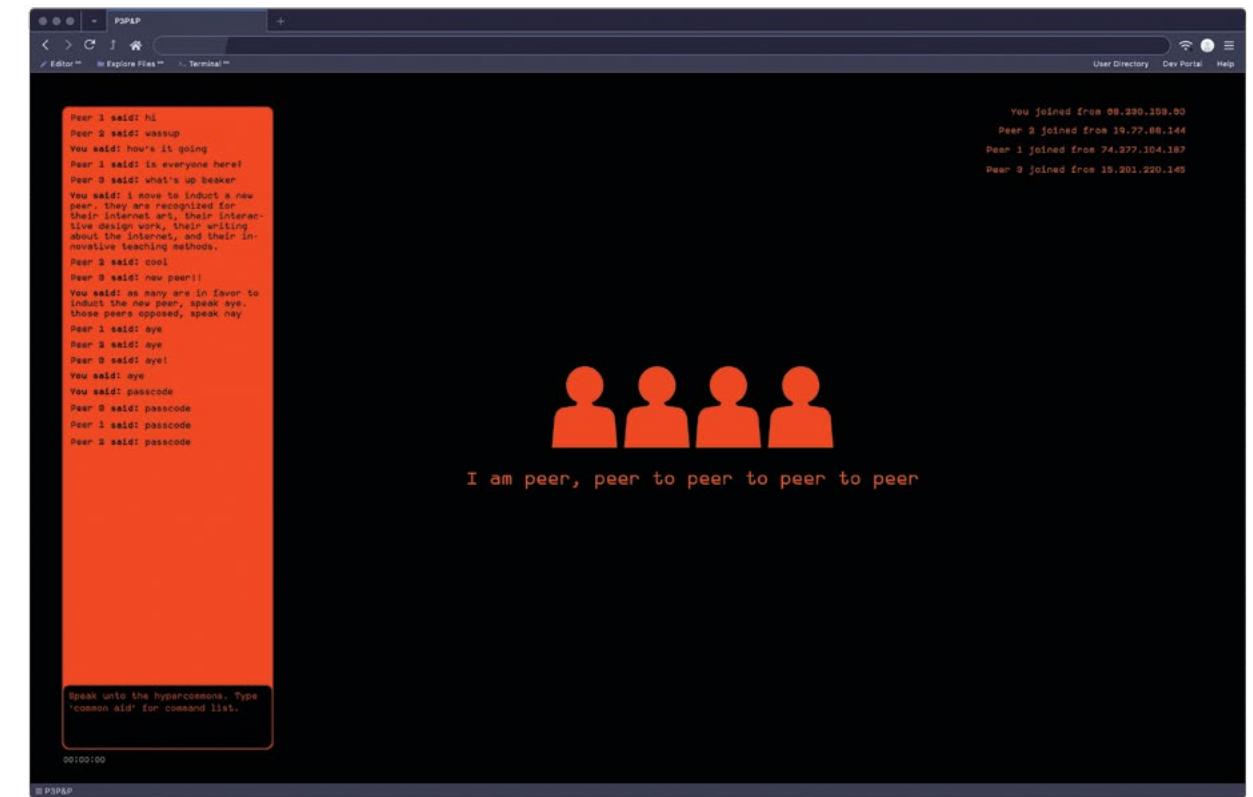
## PROJECT M PEER, PEER, PEER, AND PEER

Collaborators: Kit Son Lee, Will Mianecki, Lai Xu

*Peer, Peer, Peer, and Peer* (abbreviated *Peer<sup>3</sup>Peer*) is a meeting space, library, and publishing platform—all accessible online, but only with the presence of the peers who maintain it. Picture a group of friends with overlapping interests and values. They meet every so often at one of the friend's apartments, bringing along their current research and work materials. Occasionally, one of the friends invites someone they think might be interested in joining the group. The meeting begins when all friends arrive. Within the private space of the apartment, the group converses openly. They share an understanding that anything brought up in this space is only for those in the room. Perhaps some of the friends will leave wanting to collaborate on an idea or project, and they will return to the next meeting with updates.

*Peer<sup>3</sup>Peer* embodies this close, contained interaction in the digital space on a peer-to-peer

Landing page of the meeting site. All peers must be present and type in a passcode (disguised in this screenshot) into the chat box in order to start the meeting. Their presence is logged as IP addresses.



a positive and original perspective, the specific situations and issues that women of color face.”<sup>6</sup> With this focus Kitchen Table – along with other feminist presses – published writing by lesbians of color that may have otherwise been unavailable. Significantly, Kitchen Table defined its audience as all people of color, not just women, and maintained an intersectional and international scope. To reach these various communities, Kitchen Table brought their books to “places where people of color are”: concerts, readings, conferences like the Asian/Pacific American Heritage Festival in New York City, and book fairs including the Latin American Book Fair in New York.<sup>7</sup> In an essay about the press, co-founder Barbara Smith describes an intentional decision to be explicit about the books’ authors and perspectives through the covers. Interestingly, this entailed using graphics from indigenous African, Asian, Latino, and Indian artistic traditions – visual signals about the content. Smith contrasts this strategy with an instance of a book by a Black author

<sup>5</sup> Co-founders include Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Hattie Gossett, Helena Byard, Susan Yung, Ana Oliveira, Cherrie Moraga, Rosío Alvarez, Alma Gomez, and Leota Lone Dog.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Smith, “A Press of Our Own: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 10, no. 3 (1989): 12, accessed April 10, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3346433>.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, 12..

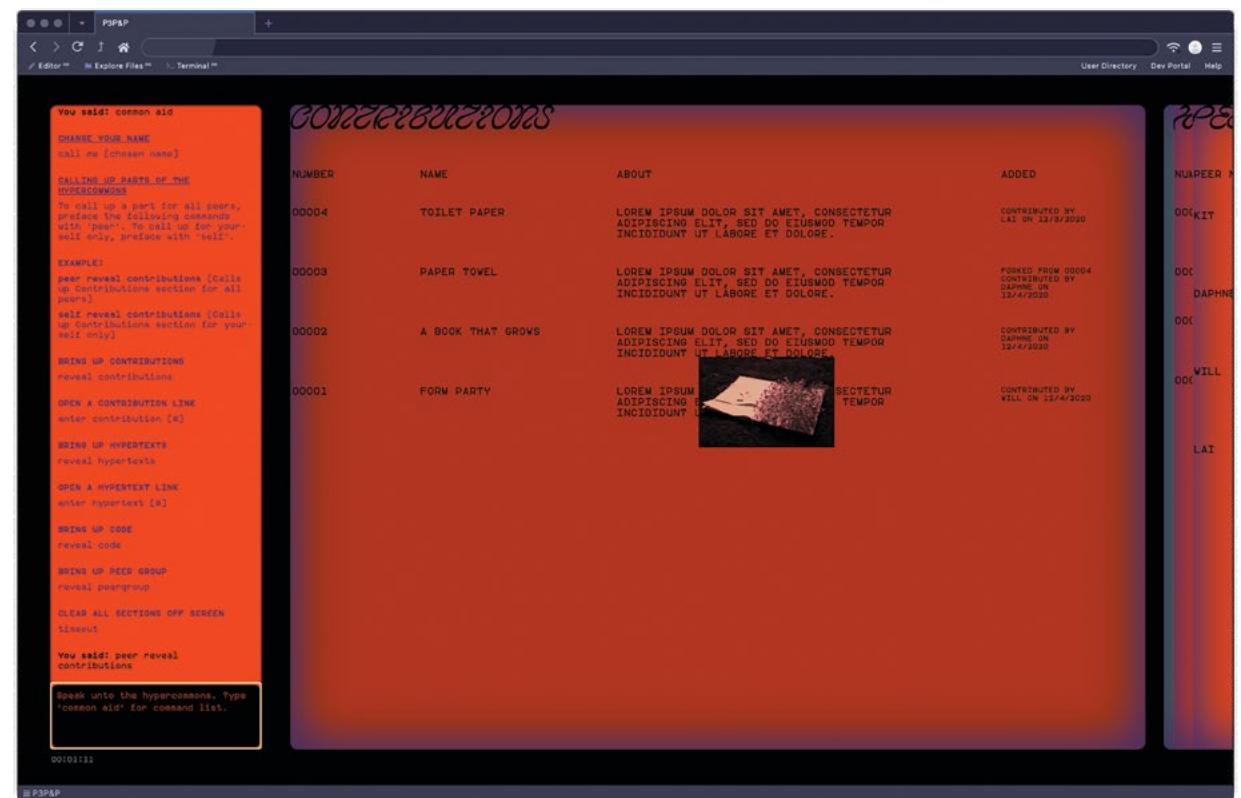
Titles and covers from Kitchen Table Press.



browser called Beaker. Born out of distanced, asynchronous learning conditions necessitated by the pandemic, the site questions collaborative tools that graphic designers default to, like Google Docs or Slack, which have cloudy privacy policies and consistently demand attention through notifications and updates. We looked to the peer-to-peer web, a decentralized system in which a user accesses a website if it’s actively being hosted and uploaded to the internet by an individual’s computer containing the site’s source files rather than a third-party server. As such, peer-to-peer inherently implies synchronous presence. When I visit Peer³Peer on Beaker Browser, I know someone else (probably Kit) is on the other end, hosting the site by having it open.

To further the ideas of privacy and control over our own information, access to Peer³Peer requires all of our attendance. Others can join through invitation and a ritualized initiation process, during which they are introduced to our values of synchronicity through physicality, data privacy, consent, trust, and generosity. Once on the site, the peers share readings, references, and projects through a chat interface that also serves as site navigation.

The meeting site acts as a publishing platform where peers offer up projects to share with each other and add to the Contributions page.



whose identity and perspective were obscured in advertising materials by their commercial publisher, apparently as a marketing decision to appeal to white audiences. “Being explicit about our books’ subject matter does not decrease [white readership], while it does ensure attention from our target audience of people of color,” Smith writes. “Our constituency, in fact, may be much larger than those of other women’s presses because we have something to offer feminist, Third World, lesbian, gay, progressive, and literary audiences.”<sup>8</sup> Kitchen

<sup>8</sup> Smith, 12. Table provided access to both women of color writers to a means of communication as well as to people of color audiences to feminist and liberatory writing.

Extending the idea of meeting an audience where they are, other independent publications like zines are often distributed through means beyond transactional models. Zines started out in the 1930s within sci-fi fan communities, and by the 70s were adopted by punk music devotees, who drew, collaged, and photocopied their DIY booklets to share among people with similar interests.<sup>9</sup> Internet forums and social media provide access to this kind of community now, but zines are still a popular form of inexpensive and urgent publishing among fandoms, cartoonists, political activists, and more. The sharing ethos also persists. Zine-makers bring their booklets to meet-ups to share their work potluck distribution-style.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Rona Akbari, “How to make a zine,” *The Creative Independent*, November 19, 2018, <https://thecreativeindependent.com/guides/how-to-make-a-zine/>.

<sup>10</sup> A term I heard from Clara Balaguer during the Hardworking Goodlucking Virtual Art Book Fair panel, 2021.

Or they conduct trades with other people who make things. Access is created within this informal economy among participants committed to sharing and reciprocity.

### 3.5

#### THE CONDITIONS OF ACCESS

In terms of getting information, the internet appears to promise unlimited access. Almost every source I’ve cited can be called up in full with a Google Search. This access comes with a cost, the extent of which a regular user of the internet may never know. I scroll through memes on Twitter and laugh at Tik Toks—all types of appropriated and remixed content that left the control of the original, uncompensated authors as soon they were posted to a social media platform. Use of the internet also comes at the expense of privacy and control over personal data. Information surmised about my

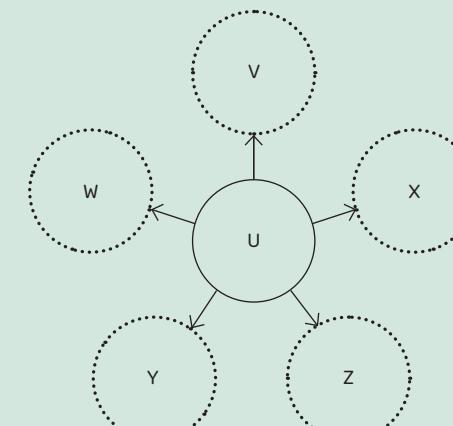


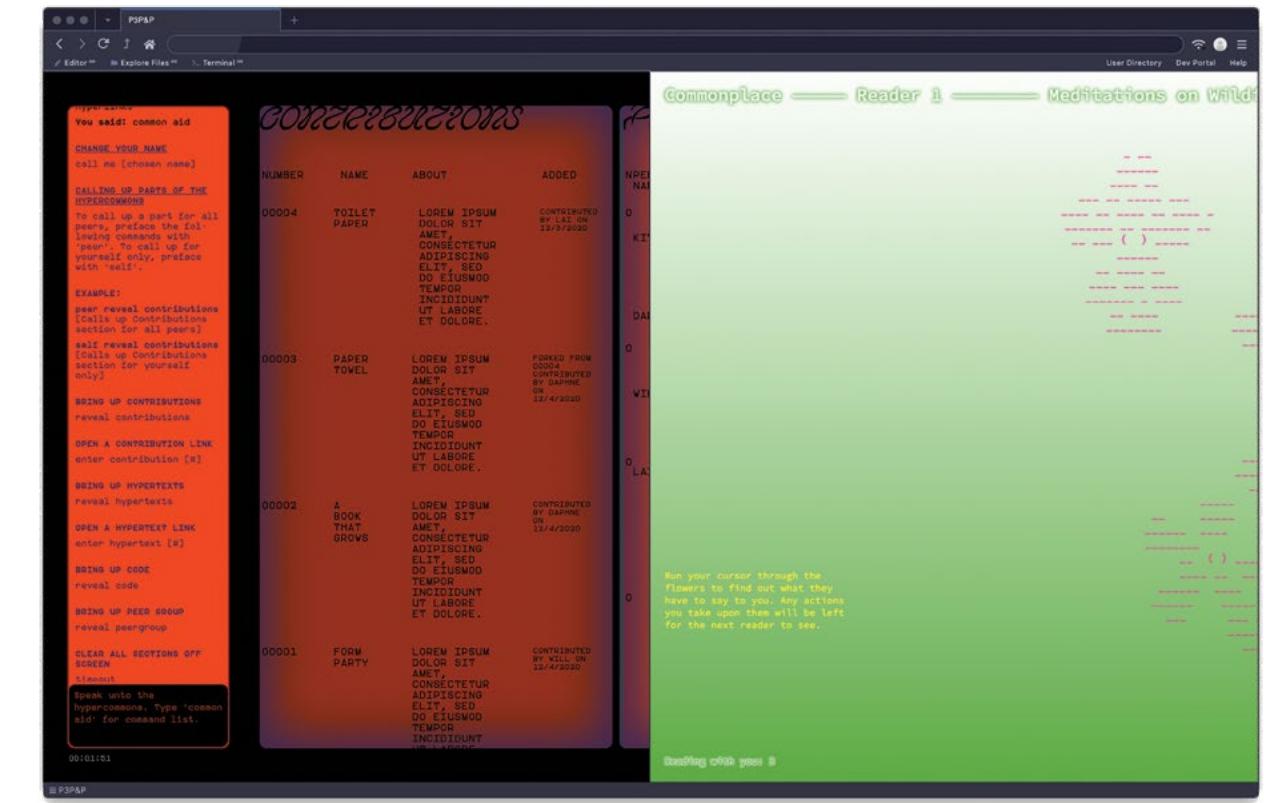
FIG. 13—CENTRALIZED ACCESS IS CONTROLLED FROM A SINGLE POINT

The responsibilities the peers take on are fluid: because all project documents are shared and collaboratively built, anyone can take on any role, whether the host, the note taker, or the designer.

At its core, *Peer³Peer* is a testing ground for modes of collaboration. Building and maintaining the site involves trust, time and space for experimentation and exploration, and good documentation so one peer’s work on the site can be picked up by another. Working in Beaker, an experimental browser new to all of us, meant that we learned the possibilities and boundaries of the platform together.

*Peer³Peer* is also an exploration in publishing. Peers offer their web and peer-to-peer-based projects to be published on the site. Because *Peer³Peer* is accessed by a limited audience and under a specific set of conditions, publishing then becomes a social act and intimate exchange. And because sites can be forked (meaning duplicated) on Beaker, and thus modified or remixed, publishing on *Peer³Peer* transforms authoring a project to an act of offering.

Peers view a project contribution together, which in Beaker Browser opens as a frame within the same browser window (mocked up with a project included in this book). Next page: before viewing any of these pages, the peers must commit to the Code, agreeing to the shared values.



P3P&P

Editor Explore Files Terminal

User Directory Dev Portal Help

Peer 1 said: hi  
 Peer 2 said: wassup  
 You said: how's it going  
 Peer 1 said: is everyone here?  
 Peer 3 said: what's up beaker  
 You said: i move to induct a new peer. they are recognized for their internet art, their interactive design work, their writing about the internet, and their innovative teaching methods.  
 Peer 2 said: cool  
 Peer 3 said: new peer!!  
 You said: as many are in favor to induct the new peer, speak aye. those peers opposed, speak nay  
 Peer 1 said: aye  
 Peer 2 said: aye  
 Peer 3 said: aye!  
 You said: aye  
 You said: passcode  
 Peer 3 said: passcode  
 Peer 1 said: passcode  
 Peer 2 said: passcode

**CODE**

WE COMMUNICATE THIS CODE TO BEAKER  
 PEER TO PEER, FORK TO FORK  
 INSURE AND CERTAIN HOPE OF  
 THE RESURRECTION TO HYPERDRIVE

**INTRODUCTION**

We're interested in the collective experience made possible, or even forced by P2P as we think about privacy and consent, longevity vs. temporality, control and ownership. It's a deliberate choice to respond to the conditions we're working under-social distancing, asynchronous learning, and how tools that were made for convenience are now necessities. P2P is a model that allows us to lean into and build alternative tools, inconvenient tools, tools that allow us to remember the physicality of synchronicity. It becomes a new way of collaborating that exists in a liminal space-still digital, but with acute awareness of the physical being on the other end.

This project isn't an exercise in nostalgia or restoration of the past -- although we acknowledge that many things were lost in the rapid turn to remote, asynchronous work. It's also not an attempt to speculate or to imagine a future removed from this moment and its systems, structures, and conditions. We are working in the present to carve a liminal, flawed space that aligns more closely with our values.

**PUBLISHING**

As a publishing platform, P2P destabilizes the way publishing tends to canonize a project-we're asking questions like what does it mean to publish just to peers, or on a browser

Speak unto the hypercommons. Type 'common aid' for command list.

00:00:09

P3P&P

identity and interests based on my actions on a website is sold to untold companies. My behavior has been subtly manipulated by notifications and A/B user tests since I first signed up for Facebook.

This data is obfuscated or opaque, like the tidy graphic user interfaces of consumer technology that obscure the way that an app or a machine works. (Or the mechanics of the diamond industry, as in *How to Get A Diamond* → Project H.) Information – often user generated like the memes and Tik Toks – is seemingly free to access and has no end. All the while, user data is tracked, logged, and sold. Companies like Facebook and Twitter regularly run experiments on users to test ways to keep them engaged on the app, whether through suggestions, trending topics, or constantly refreshed content. This amount of surveillance and documentation consolidates the personal data of many in the hands of a few corporations, who find ways to monetize these logs. Academic Shoshanna Zuboff labels this way of doing business “surveillance capitalism,” writing, “Surveillance capitalists produce deeply anti-democratic asymmetries of knowledge and the power that accrues to knowledge. They know everything about us, while their operations are designed to be unknowable to us. They predict our futures and configure our behaviour, but for the sake of others’ goals and financial gain.”<sup>1</sup>

Access to web searches, email communication, online networking, entertainment, and other basic uses of the internet come with tradeoffs. The true nature of consent that users purport to give when faced with pages-long Terms and Conditions Statements comes under question. Remote design education at RISD involves Zoom, Canvas, Google Drive, and Slack – all tools that require privacy concessions in some form. What do students lose in having to agree to use these tools? What alternatives exist? Can the peer-to-peer, privacy-centric model that Peer, Peer, Peer, and Peer provides be viable → Project M?

### 3.6 ACCESS THROUGH REDISTRIBUTION

Where else is information stored and kept? This thesis book, as far as I know, exists publicly in a few places: as a PDF online in Fleet Library’s Digital Commons; in physical form either on a

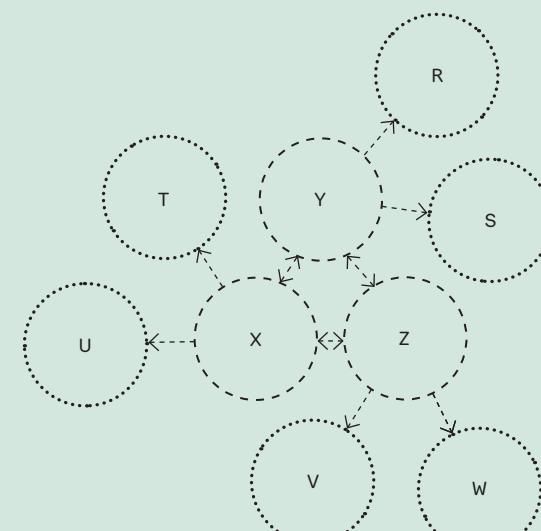


FIG. 14 – DECENTRALIZED ACCESS IS SHARED AMONG SEVERAL POINTS

### PROJECT N DESIGN SCHOOL BRIEFS

In response to the Mirror Schools prompt → 3.6, I collected as many syllabi and project descriptions as I could find on the internet and in my files to organize into a shared archive. This database is:

- A protocol for finding and collecting the syllabi and project briefs for university-level graphic design courses posted online (can also use for other disciplines)
- A publicly editable Google Sheets document with a growing list of RISD graphic design courses with their corresponding syllabi and project briefs, all found online
- A back-up collection of these documents in PDF form stored on Google Drive
- A possible starting point for someone who wants to curate their own design education
- A resource for an instructor pulling together their own syllabus
- An archive of classes for future students to refer to in order to understand the arc of their own education
- An unofficial archive on shaky ground, supported by a set of search instructions that can reinstate it in a new form if it ever disappears

List of briefs as of May 2021.

dark bookshelf in the far north corner of the second floor of Fleet Library or behind glass doors on a bookshelf in the departmental office of our program director Bethany Johns, in the CIT Building. To be holding this book in your hands, you are likely a student, staff or faculty member at RISD, graduate, or perhaps a prospective student. Maybe I'm telling you about my work and handed you this book. To be reading this on screen, you stumbled across it somehow online. Perhaps you found out about the RISD Grad Show 2021 through a sponsored story on *Hyperallergic* or a promo email or an Instagram post, then clicked on enough links to get here. In any case, unless I actively promote or distribute this book, the access to this thesis is limited. The research and knowledge documented here is largely gatekept by the institution, accessible primarily to those who pay tuition.

During the 2020–2021 school year, that tuition cost \$53,820, plus an \$800 Academic and Technology Fee and \$270 Student Activity Fee. Tuition increased 3.8% from the previous year.<sup>1</sup> This news broke at an incredibly financial-

<sup>1</sup> Rosanne Somerson, “[Students] COVID-19 Update: 04.15.20,” email to RISD students, staff, and faculty, April 15, 2020 (5:42 p.m. ET).

ly precarious period of time as students were in the midst of reconfiguring their lives during the onset of the pandemic. This past year, my time attending class or doing schoolwork happened at home, online. Access to the studio spaces, tools, printers, and libraries that drew me to RISD in the first place was severely limited. The value of university education compared to rising tuition costs has been under scrutiny for years, and even more so during the pandemic. If all classes can be conducted online, potentially reaching a broader audience, then what role does the university play? Could I just put this thesis on the internet for more people to theoretically access?

The former question was posed by *Mirror Schools: Education in a State of Emergency*, a workshop held during the 2021 MFA Graphic Design Biennial.<sup>2</sup> What alternative types of education, critical of the university’s privatization and commercialization, might emerge? As RISD students with access to academic materials, how could we repack-age the institution into free and publicly accessible resources? Perhaps the curriculum itself, as through *Design School Briefs* → Project N?

<sup>2</sup> Chris Hamamoto and Federico Pérez Villoro, “Mirror Schools: Education in a State of Emergency,” February 4–6, 2021, <http://mirrorschools.designing.tools/>.

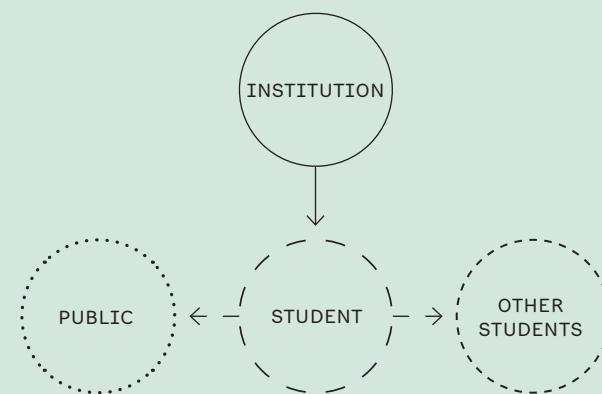
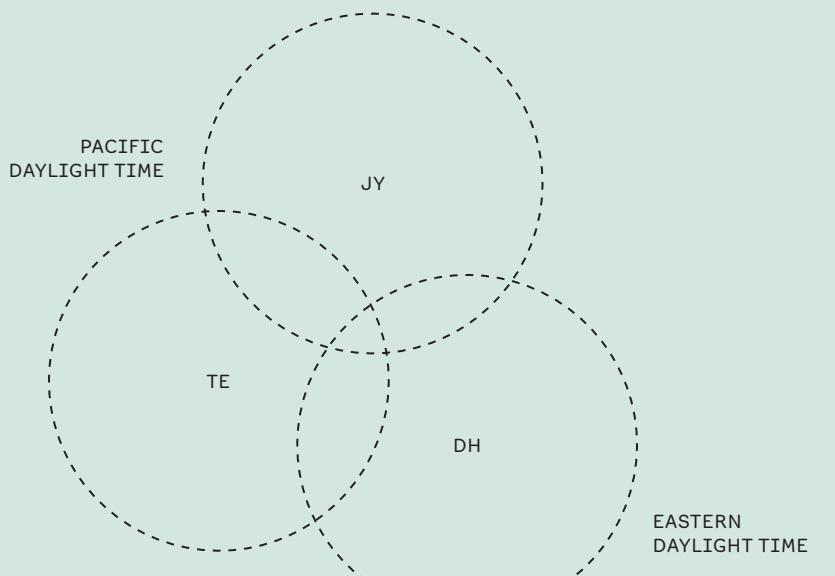


FIG. 15 – REDISTRIBUTING RESOURCES

Protocol for searching for public design briefs.

	A	B	C	D	E
1	How to Google course briefs	To find out if course materials from university art programs are hosted online somewhere, try these searches:			
2		{ Going through faculty } search <i>name of institution + graphic design + faculty</i> , then click through faculty names if their institution's website hosts course information			
3		{ Going through faculty } search <i>name of institution + graphic design + faculty</i> , then search <i>faculty names</i> to find their websites, then look through their websites if available for links to their courses			
4		{ Going through faculty + course } search <i>faculty name + name of course taught</i> ; you can also find student work from this course this way too			
5		{ Going through curriculum } search <i>name of institution + graphic design + curriculum</i> , then you may need to do some digging to find a list of courses or a course catalog, then search the <i>course number &amp; names</i>			
6					
7					
8	About	This collection of RISD Graphic Design class briefs is an attempt to collect course project prompts as a way to redistribute knowledge-making, de-mistify the creative process, and create an ongoing and annotated archive of the design program through class activities.			
9	Contribute	Many of the RISD GD course syllabi and briefs are hosted online, whether through Google Docs (and Binder) or faculty websites. Following the formatting of the sheet, add links to briefs from classes you've taken. Include "mirror" versions of the briefs where you independently host the briefs as back ups.			
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Jayme Yen and Tom Eykemans are both graphic designers based in Seattle, Washington, as well as the co-founders of Seattle Art Book Fair and my friends. Jayme was my first boss in a graphic design position; I worked with her as an intern at the Henry Art Gallery, a contemporary art museum, where she collaborated with artists on books and exhibition catalogs. I met Tom through Jayme when he worked at the University of Washington Press, where he designed books on scholarly subjects. Over the years, they both took on their own self-initiated book projects. Jayme published *Idiom*, a zine series exploring written and visual metaphors in shared language. Tom started up Tome Press, a publishing project full of book experiments.

In 2019, Jayme and Tom put the gears in motion to start an art book fair in Seattle, set to launch in May the following year. They cancelled those plans as soon as the severity of the pandemic became clear; in 2021, they pivoted toward an online programming-heavy celebration of art books called Makeready. I spoke to them on the eve of Makeready's launch about the event itself, their relationship to books, and collaboration.

## DAPHNE HSU

I appreciate you coming to chat about books. In my thesis work, I've been interested in books and other graphic design mediums in the way that they distribute and circulate, how audiences interface with these different mediums, and how a medium can open up different ways of engaging with other people through reciprocity or creating access to different types of information and content.

My first question is: what is each of your relationships to making books in terms of what you want the book to be?

## JAYME YEN

I think that there's an aspect to publishing, or there's an aspect of making books, that is worldbuilding. It can be thought of as an experience. It's not just reading things on the page; it's as nitty-gritty details as where the page numbers are—which is a decision that you can spend days on—to how the book opens or how certain bits of information are conveyed, and what form and format that they take. I really love the worldbuilding aspect of books and publications. I think one of my favorite things to do is to work with another designer or to work with another artist on creating something together, collaborating on something where you discuss these ideas. You give form to these ideas and the ideas spawn other ideas that are related to the initial ideas, and you just create this whole ecosystem out of it.

## TOM EYKEMANS

I have some really similar thoughts, and Jayme, you just said worldbuilding is kind of key to it. The first term I thought was "storytelling," which I think is a similar or parallel track. It's an engagement with something that somebody wants to tell, but maybe they don't have the means or the way to do it in a way that's effective and reaching an audience. I think, from a design perspective, I look for the opportunity to collaborate with [an author] to help them tell the story. Whether it's a literal story, or maybe it's a presentation of research or facts, or maybe it's artwork, or anything that they want to convey to the world that could benefit from being presented in a unique or creative way that makes it more engaging.

## DH

I think worldbuilding is a really interesting frame. Worldbuilding or storytelling, especially, through the form of a book. What considerations do you make about the audience or the

distribution of a book in relation to the ideas that are being played out with a collaborator with an author?

## TE

There are certain conventions that are conventions because they work a certain way. The book could be gigantic, as big as a door or something, but it will be difficult to open and manage and use. It could be an interesting experiment for a different purpose. But at the same time, you want to think about how your audience is going to interact with this content that's going to be transmitted, and whether that's something that's handheld and easy to parse and easy to read, and is designed with clarity and communication in mind, which leads you down a path that's often something that is eventually your book.

## JY

Maybe because I work a lot with individual artists, I think about how the book—or the eventual book—in its format can be this expression of the artist and their work, and how closely those things can be aligned, and whether or not the book can do what the artist does. The book is a verb. It's already doing the thing that the artist is doing, versus being just a documentation of what the artist does. That's one thing that I think is really fun to think about, especially in relationship to a collaborative partnership.

The constraints of bookmaking are also really fun to think about and try to maneuver around. Like, okay, we don't have a \$50,000 budget for something; maybe it's like \$500. So how can you make something within that range and still make it fun and interesting as a project?

In terms of distribution, distribution is something that I also really like thinking about. There are so many ways to play with it, especially for more indie publishing, experimental books that are without a set plan for distribution. How can distribution become part of the way the book interacts with the world? Does it have a physical form, does it have a digital form, does it have both? How's it going to find the audience that it needs to find? Because I also don't think every book is necessarily for everybody. It's really, really special when someone finds the book that really speaks to them, but I think it's totally fine, too, if our audience is just five people, and it's not 5,000 or 5 million.

For *Idiom*—especially the book about rocks—I still remember sitting behind the table at LA Art Book Fair and being really nervous about how everybody was going to think

about *Idiom* and having some people look at it, and just watching them smile was the best feeling. Even the ones that didn't buy it. It's okay—even though I really did want them to buy it. It was still really fun to see people just get touched by or feel delighted by something that they ran across.

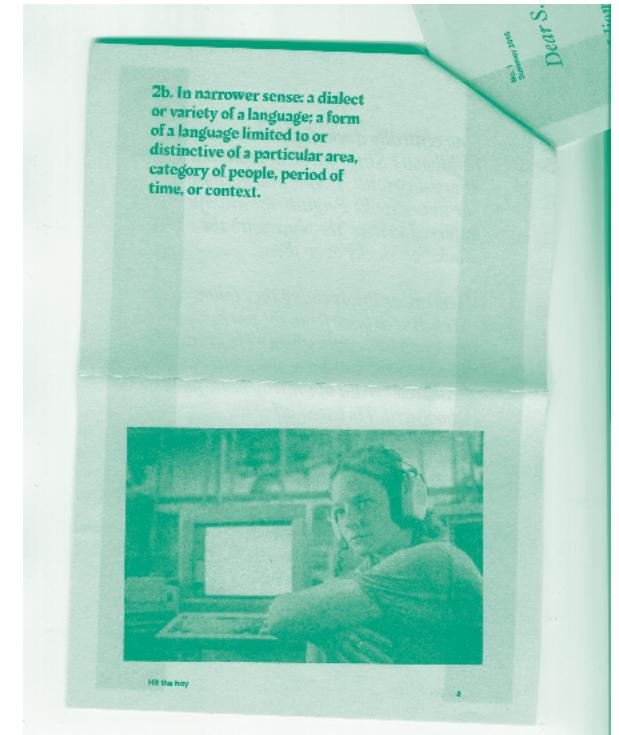
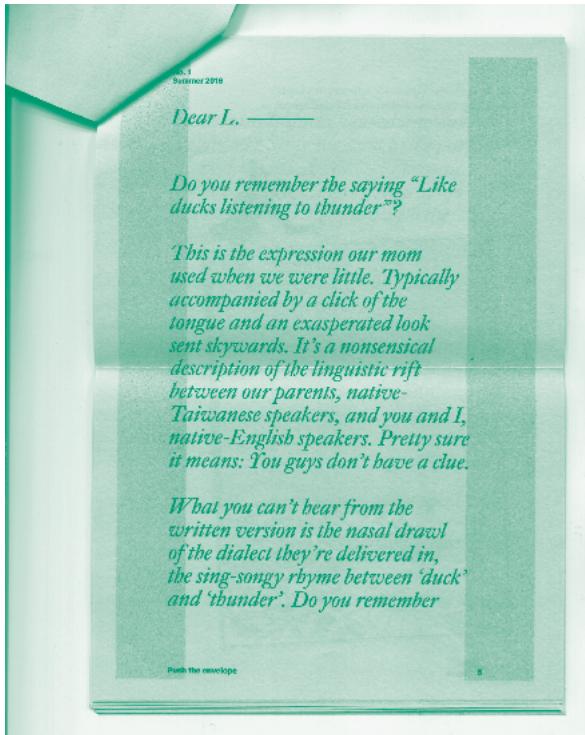
DH

You brought up *Idiom*, and I was wondering if each of you could talk a bit more about these self-initiated bookmaking projects. What were the motivations? How did you see those books out in the public once they were published?

TE

The publishing projects that I've initiated over the last few years or so are more like a recent exploration for me. My career has been much more focused on the designer, the designer's role, and staying in my lane with a little bit of crossover if there's opportunities for creative collaboration, but for the most part, helping others publish their works. It wasn't until more recently that I started to become more interested in thinking of how publishing could be a form of more artistic expression from a more personal standpoint.

*Idiom* #1, Jayme Yen, 2016. Images courtesy of the designer.



There's the Kippenberger Challenge, which is really something that prompted me to focus more on producing something because it's really difficult for me to have a project like that and then stick to it and actually produce something. It's easy to have lots of ideas all the time, but never actually commit to any one of them. There's this project that's been going on for some time called the Kippenberger Challenge, where they encourage you to produce the average publishing output of the German artist Martin Kippenberger, which ended up being approximately seven-and-a-little-bit books per year. For people who join up with this challenge, we're encouraged to produce that many books in one year. A few years ago, that's what I embarked on, and it really forced me to think about how to approach a project, what I actually wanted to say with any of the publishing experiments that I took on. It was an interesting exercise to get your bad ideas out the door first because there's always your first idea that you have to just \*bluh\* out, and that leads to the next idea, which might be a little bit more considered or have a little bit more interesting angle. And then, over time, I feel like something I hadn't expected was that by the end of it, you're really engaging with

publishing as an artistic practice and thinking about how what you want to say can be adapted to a publishing format.

JY

I'm glad you brought up the Kippenberger Challenge. I'm very slow when it comes to working on my own work, like *Idiom*. I think *Idiom* number three has been in the works for maybe about two years. As a zine, that's a very slow output. I should really sign up for the Kippenberger Challenge myself. I think one reason why I wanted to make *Idiom*, or do that kind of stuff, is because in other design projects you just don't get opportunities to work through every single idea that you have. And sometimes you just want to make stuff because you want to try it out, and because other people are doing cool, fun stuff so why can't I do cool, fun stuff? And also have something which you don't have to take that seriously, that is much more of a playground for ideas than something that's hard and fast.

I still remember one of my favorite printers, a master printer, saying his idea for when he retired from the Jan van Eyck [Academie] was, "I want to publish books, I want to have my own press." I remember him saying, "No one prints books for money; you do it for the love of books. You just love the activity itself." I think making *Idiom* as slow as it takes is an expression of joy and fun and experimentation, and it keeps me interested in design when all other design projects might be going down the tube. It's really fun to think about.

Publishing, too, is so open to so many different forms. That's what's really gratifying about being also part of the whole art book fair scene and going to art book fairs in the first place, is just seeing, like, *Oh, shit! Every single thing counts as publication*. Quite literally almost every single thing counts as a publication. If you call it a publication, it's there. It's so fun to see people have fun with it, so I think that's also another reason why I got into *Idiom* and making that kind of stuff.

DH

How do your design or your material decisions differ in client work versus more self-expressionistic or experimental work? How have you seen your brain shift from one mode to another, if at all? And is there anything that you've seen at these book fairs that have encouraged you to make a publication that you wouldn't have considered a publication?

TE

I think I must have started going to art book fairs before taking this challenge on. For the same reason that Jayme said, those really open our eyes to what a publication could be, how much fun it could be. Just the sheer variety of things out there that people are making is really exciting.

When I started thinking of ideas for my own publications, obviously I didn't really have to produce a lot of them. I didn't have to really think about print runs and marketing and promotion and publicity and editing and all those things that go into making a more conventional book. I mean, I could have, and I did for one of them, but for the most part they were just fun little experiments. I started thinking about things that I've collected over the years because I'm a mild hoarder. I had this little cigar box full of every fortune cookie I've ever had over the years and there's 100 little fortunes in there. I started to think about how those can be bound together into a little book and each fortune has its own page—and then thinking about what kind of materials, bindings, things like that could kind of complement that content. For another one, I wanted to explore this phobia that I've had since I was a kid about dark holes, and thinking about what types of paper, what kind of format could most reflect the qualities of the concept that I was trying to represent in paper in this loosely defined publication format. It's really exciting to play with those elements, knowing that they might not be possible to reproduce in the real world.

The more that you work in publishing, the more you recognize opportunities for ways to use different types of paper, or different types of printing techniques that could potentially even save on expenses if it's done right. You learn to work within the framework in ways that lead to opportunities that I don't think I would have recognized early on.

JY

I think that idea of working within the limitations and getting a lot of creative freedom out of those limitations is something that I've been interested in with my own [work], like *Idiom*. What can you do with the tools that you have? If I don't want to hire an offset printer, if I want to just be able to run it off of a black and white printer, if I want to be able to make 20 copies at a time, all these different considerations. But also make it feel book-like enough, or make it have enough of a binding. With *Idiom* #1, I just staple-bound it, just like you would if



*Oubliette*, Tom Eykemans, 2019. A medieval dungeon, or "fear hole," reimagined through dimensional typography. Image courtesy of the designer.

you were in school, you just staple in the corner. I have to say, I'm extremely lazy. I'm both extremely lazy and extremely impatient, so I'm definitely not the kind of designer that's going to be, like, *I'm gonna silkscreen this, I'm going to make some screens*. I fucking hate silkscreen. I would much rather hire somebody else to do it and make those kinds of things. Even risograph is really at the edge of my wanting to do something that involved. I'm really impressed with everybody who can stand it and who can run and operate every risograph press because I think that stuff is so time-consuming. So for me, it's always been like, *Oh, how do I get it to meet my standards of "it feels book-like," it feels like a fun experimental publication, but I can do it cheaply, quickly, with a limited amount of things*.

In terms of what I've seen at art book fairs, it's been inspiring. I was just actually thinking about Thick Press – all the stuff that they've been doing, and the book in progress, or book things that they do that are more process-oriented necessarily rather than final book type stuff is super inspiring.

I'm also always impressed by folks who have the time to also do a lot of writing as they're making publications. I don't have a ton of time to write, and I wish I had more time to write. I'm still in the phase of like, *Well, I'm just going to take some copy from here, copy-paste something from Wikipedia*. I just kind

of public domain something together. But I'm hoping to get more into writing and thinking about writing and creating all the content for publication versus reassembling it out of other things around me.

TE

That's funny, that reminds me of a professor – it was probably Doug Wadden. He used to say that a good designer needs to know how to draw well. Maybe that's a more famous quote that I'm just reattributing, but I feel like that's more of an old-fashioned way of thinking of the designer as a craftsperson, whereas writing or being able to communicate through other mediums, I feel is a much more holistic way of thinking about design in a contemporary sense.

DH

I know both of you are readers too, so I wonder: do your reading experiences ever influence the decisions that you make with book design? How does being a reader interact with you being a designer too?

TE

I'm sure it does on a conscious level and also an unconscious level or subconscious level. I buy a lot of old used paperbacks and stuff, and a lot of times those mass market paperbacks are just printed right to the edge of the page, and there's no margin. So if I'm reading – like here, I have *Anna Karenina*, and it's a million pages, and I'm constantly mad at how close to the margin all this text is and [it's got a] little gutter. Whether or not it's conscious, in my own book work I kind of like to open things up, and it might be a reaction to that kind of frustrations with other approaches to bookmaking.

JY

Most of my reading these days takes place on my phone. I borrow a lot of books from the Seattle Public Library, so I'm just reading them on the Libby app, which is really good! I really like that app. But I think something that influences me about that experience is how much you miss in terms of the physical information of a physical book. I remember so distinctly with the physical book, if I'm reading like a mystery or involved fantasy that has too many people to keep track of, I will – because you can physically remember, like, *Oh, this is the part where that guy came in, but I'm over here* – turn back, like, *Oh, I remember the book was this thick*. And I could go back and reference it. But you don't get any of that information with a digital book

or something that you're reading on your phone, so I guess I think a lot about like, *How can you be generous with the reader? How can you keep them informed about where they are as they're navigating any type of publication?*

There are also tropes of reading that I still think about. There are certain kinds of books that I think about all the time. There's one by Rebecca Solnit called *The Faraway Nearby*. It's a memoir of her relationship to her mother, but then also there's this long single story that she's telling along the footer of every single page. There's a single story on every single page, and then it ends at the same time that the main memoir ends. I just think that you could never do that in a digital book in the same way that you could in a physical book, and it is shattering when both the memoir and the story end at the same time. It's the most incredible effect. Also, I think she's an amazing writer.

It's that kind of stuff that I see in physical books that people are still doing. I also think about footnotes. I love a footnote,

and I really want to keep using them more. I would love to figure out more ways to incorporate footnotes in my design work.

TE

I love that you have a go-to book that's an example of how a physical book works better than an e-book or a digital experience. My go-to book, kind of along the same lines, is called *House of Leaves*. If people bring this topic up, I always mention that book as kind of a common touchstone just because the text – it scales larger and smaller, and the margins change, and it rotates on the page and sometimes it overlaps itself, and then sometimes it shrinks down to just a few words a page, and I think there's even just a blank stretch in the middle of the book at one point. It's a way for the form of the content to reflect what the book is about, which is a mysterious house. I love sharing that one for that exact same reason – that you become very aware that you're reading a book as you read that one in particular.

*Fortunate*, Tom Eykemans. Twenty years of fortune cookie wisdom bound in a single tiny book. Image courtesy of the designer.



JY

The type in that book makes the content so much scarier than it would be otherwise, you know? It makes it spooky—like way spookier.

TE

Talk about footnotes, that one. I feel like [they're] half that book, which becomes its own story in itself. The footnotes have a presence.

DH

In the printed form, all these conventions of a book can get played up in ways that can really surprise or delight or shape your experience of reading that couldn't be replicated digitally.

JY

That's interesting that you say that there's all these conventions that these authors and book designers are subverting. It'd be interesting if a book you read on a phone used more of the phone's infrastructure to interrupt the reading or support the reading somehow. What if you were reading a book and you got notifications on your phone somehow related to the narrative? What if you got notifications from a character in the book? Or a timer went off and you realize like... this is a good idea, maybe. I don't know. Storyboard this out. What if there was a timer and you realize like, *Oh, you've got something cooking on the stove*, so maybe that you become part of the story. I don't know, but it'd be interesting, at least.

DH

I'm wondering if maybe we could talk about the Seattle Art Book Fair. What was the motivation to organize the Seattle Art Book Fair? Can you talk about the expression of it this year, the thinking behind this first foot forward into the public in May as Makeready?

TE

Like we talked about earlier, we both attended art book fairs up and down the West Coast and also the New York Art Book Fair, and exhibited at different art book fairs, including all of us at the Vancouver Art Book Fair. All of these events were creatively energizing and exciting to see what people were producing and a fun experience to be a part of, which also led to us thinking, why doesn't Seattle have a similar kind of event? Seattle's just as big as these other cities. It was recently designated as a UNESCO city of literature. It's known for its literary interests and opportunities, but at the same time it felt like there's this big missing hole of

connecting the arts communities with the publishing communities. Once we recognized that, and then after complaining a little bit about, *Well, why isn't there one in Seattle?* we quickly came to the realization that, well, somebody has to make these events and it might as well be us.

So I think that with both of our backgrounds and experience, we already had networks in place that we could reach out to and start connecting things. We began the meeting with people that might be interested in contributing or advising in different ways and built up a network of connections that way, which led to us planning out the first in-person fair, which would have taken place last spring and, of course, was cancelled due to COVID. It had just been on the verge of really hitting that home-stretch of putting everything together, so it didn't quite make it out into the world, but it did lay a lot of groundwork that we're able to continue using moving forward, which leads us to this year.

JY

We had pushed out our rental date to have Washington Hall to spring 2021, and then we realized pretty quickly at the start of this year that there was no way that the world was going to be open and safe enough for anybody to feel good about gathering together. We talked to Kelly Froh from Short Run [a long-running comix and arts festival in Seattle] and had a lot of good conversations with her to see what Kelly's thinking was, knowing that a lot of art book fairs were still not going to come back in-person this year, including Short Run and that's later in the fall. What if we did a virtual art book fair or virtual something?

We've also had these experiences with virtual art book fairs; some of them great, some of them a little bit puzzling. There are all different kinds of experiences. Knowing that our capacities, we can't do any sort of Printed Matter-type art book fair bonanza online—they just have too many resources that we don't have. But we talked to a couple of the people who did virtual art book fairs this past year. We talked to Vancouver Art Book Fair and Brooklyn Art Book Fair, and they both had great things to say about their experiences, their intentions, the things that they did to prep. I think even then, we really quickly realized we don't have the capacity to do it in such a way that it mimics the exhibitor experience, where you're selling something through this time period. We realized we're not focusing on selling stuff.



Tom Eykeman's books under Tome Press, alongside some friends' zines, for sale at Vancouver Art Book Fair, 2018.

Maybe we focus on programming and talking about art books and getting people more familiar with who might show up at a Seattle Art Book Fair in terms of exhibitors.

That very quickly led to thinking, *Oh, what if it was more educational?* Because we still get a lot of questions about what exactly an art book is. People in this area are really familiar with maybe more antiquarian-type books, or maybe artist's books, because the UW [University of Washington] has such a great collection of artist's books and then the Bainbridge Island Museum of Art has a great collection, and also with comics and zines, which are very alive and well in Washington. "Art book" as an umbrella category is less familiar. Very quickly it began to turn towards: let's talk about how to make an art book from start to finish. What if this is building them into the 2022 in-person art book fair by basically preparing the audience for what to expect and also getting people excited about art books who may actually already be making art books, they just don't consider themselves to be part of that category? And helping to encourage them to partake in this community if they want to, realize that it's out there. Then for those who want to get started, to give them a boost in resources this way.

Alongside the educational framework, we're also thinking, how can we support

newcomers to the art book scene? We've been thinking about this grant, for instance. How can we announce this grant, give someone X amount of dollars so that they could create something and be able to exhibit and sell it next year? We were also thinking too, since we split out the weekends for Makeready to three versus one massive weekend, maybe someone could take all three workshops or attend a series of art book programming and make something by the end of May. That is a part of the initial thinking, like *Oh, since the weekends are all themed, like before a book, during a book, after a book.* Conceptually, someone could use that time to start and execute a zine, but I think that's a little bit harder than we realized.

TE

I love the idea that this event will make some people realize that what they've been making all along counts as an art book. We even have one participant who we confirmed to be on one of our panels (which we're calling "conversations" to make it a little bit more friendly). They even wrote this apologetic little note that was like, "I only make zines, I hope that's okay," and we're like, "Of course that's okay! Welcome to the art book world, you're one of us!"

I love to be able to offer that kind of identity for people who might all be working in their own little silos.

JY

I think that's such a nice part about the art book fair—there's all these people making things, and almost every art book fair I've gone to has always felt like a reunion. There are people who are running into each other because they know each other from the art book fair circuit, or they know each other from other contexts. Everyone is pretty excited to see each other, because maybe they don't see each other often. I've run into people that I haven't seen for years at art book fairs, and it's great! It's a happy time, and it's fun to get to know your neighbors at the different tables. It's fun for people to go up and talk to you, or you to go up to talk to other people about the things that they have. They're usually pretty happy to talk about it.

There's such an atmosphere that's really encouraging that I don't know if other art fairs have. Where other art can be seen as much more exclusive, I don't think of art books as being an exclusive category. So much under the sun falls into art books. I'm sure other people could be critical, and I'm sure there are other people who'll say it's not an inclusive community, but in general, as a format and as a platform for making art, it's very wide open.

DH

I think that's so interesting that the Seattle Art Book Fair, being new, is capturing that essence of other art book fairs, like being a reunion as you said, and starting out as a very open, inviting, inclusive, like, *Come on in*.

I was looking through the programs listed. I was like, *Oh, there are so many people who do so many different things in terms of topics, but also form*. There are academic people and people who are in archiving and also people who are making zines. I feel like that [inviting feeling] is reflected in the programming.

What are the kinds of audiences that you want to reach? Obviously you're bringing together different networks of people who are making things and inviting people in who might not call themselves people who make art books, but I'm wondering if you could talk more specifically about who you want to bring in.

JY

We've definitely thought about students of design, students of art, people who might be making things. I imagine a lot of people who are in the younger range who are just curious and fascinated by this world. I'd be curious to see if there are people who consider themselves



Recap of the first weekend of panelists, workshop leaders, and office hours visits of Makeready. From @seattleartbookfair.

JY

artists or bookmakers coming who may have a much narrower definition of what falls into the artist category or art book category and realizing like, *Oh, wow, everything. This all counts too!*

TE

I think this particular event, Makeready, is probably going to draw more of that crowd that already is working in these areas and already knows about it, just because it's much harder to reach people that might not know about this already.

That's why I think having an in-person event is going to be really exciting because it'll be a physical space people can go to. Like other art book fairs, it has a really kind of festive atmosphere, and people show up who have no idea what art books are. They're kind of like, *Here's a cool event to go to this weekend!* and they might get drawn into that world themselves, or they might tell others about it, and the creative energy spreads that way.

One thing that's really been important to me in thinking about all this is that it feels like Seattle, specifically—its character has really changed over the past 10 years or so. There are fewer and fewer spaces and opportunities for people to work creatively just because of expenses and real estate, limitations and things like that. Having a creative energy that stakes its claim in Seattle, I think, is a really important way to keep that spirit going here.

JY

I would love for somebody to come to Makeready and not have any idea, but have maybe been making zines in their bedroom. Imagine a young person who didn't realize that there's a name for this stuff. There's a name and a community that does this. I think how much impact that could have, knowing that these options are there for them to explore, especially if they don't have an art background and they don't have a design background. And maybe it's looking at something like Makeready or attending Makeready makes them feel less alone.

DH

With Makeready being online, I already shared [the event website] with people in my cohort, and I'm thinking, *Oh, there are people on the East Coast and might be attending*. It could feasibly be people all over the world attending. But I feel like the motivation for the event is coming from a place of really understanding Seattle. How are you thinking about balancing the local versus global reach of the fair?

JY

Primarily with Makeready, we've been thinking mostly, if not dominantly, about the local. Because the in-person fair is taking place locally, it really is a way for us to begin promoting the 2022 fair to people here and making sure that we have some form of audience for something that's so new. The closest art book fair is Vancouver. We've really mostly been focused on local. We haven't even bothered really thinking about East Coast time zones. I mean only very, very slightly. Because Seattle is not an art city in the way that New York is an art city or LA is an art city and where there might be several different versions of an art book fair or something like that happening in all those locations. Art-type things here are strange; it's a very small community. It doesn't have a ton of reach throughout Seattle, or even through the greater Seattle area. And it's the same people that are exhibiting over and over again in Seattle, and they're also moving out and leaving Seattle. I think we've been mostly concerned with reaching the local audience and making sure that there's a high percentage of local representation in the speakers and the programming, so that people can realize, *Oh, this stuff exists here, these are people from different corners of the community here*.

TE

I think that's exactly right. Even when we're conceiving of whether or not to have an event this year, one of the things that came up is: as a brand new art fair that doesn't have an established history or built-in audience or built-in name recognition or anything, who are we to start a new fair in the middle of all this? What can we add to the conversation that hasn't already been shared? Especially in a national or international sense, because there are incredible things happening all over the world, our little upstart fair is almost like a drop in the bucket relative to all that. Having the local focus is so key to everything that it ended up forming the whole structure and concept of what we came up with.

JY

I think it's also about really wanting to be part of Seattle and part of this community and less of *Oh, we're going to helicopter in a bunch of people from all over*. We know a bunch of people from all over who could easily helicopter in and talk at length about all the cool work that they're doing. But I think it is about trying to support the community here, the people who

might already be doing stuff. My biggest fear is still [that] there are probably fantastic bookmakers and zinemakers and art bookmakers here that we just haven't heard of because they're not necessarily connected into our networks, but hopefully they'll hear about Makeready and get connected in some way. That's all part and parcel of really focusing on the local.

## DH

There's a flattening effect or a democratic effect of having everyone in one space together.

I'm wondering if I could shift the topic a little bit to collaboration, because putting together the fair is a collaboration. For both of you, collaboration is a big part of your own design work and design practices. You talked about the collaborative aspect of making books. Could you talk a bit more about collaboration as part of your practices, and how that also might show up in different ways outside of making a design artifact?

## TE

Having some sort of collaborative aspect feels really important to the way that I approach design and think about the work that I do. It can be kind of humbling, in a way, to bring in other people's insights and experience and knowledge. It can give your own ideas more dimensions that you may not have been able to see from your own perspective. It's exciting to know that you're building something together, whether it's a book design or a logo or a poster or whole festival. It's almost like the scale doesn't matter. I think if you can share this constructive experience with someone else and also gain other insights and angles, everybody benefits from it, and it ends up being a much more exciting creation in the end.

## JY

I agree. I think collaborating can be really, really fun. As a younger designer just out of school, there was definitely the sense—and I'm pretty sure everybody in my cohort felt this way—that designers know a lot. Designers know everything and clients should listen to designers because designers are making the right decisions or blah blah blah. There's definitely a lot of ego involved, and I think that probably happens to young designers all over because you just spent all this time thinking about this kind of stuff.

But that's such a harmful way of thinking, that your client or commissioner doesn't have anything to contribute to the whole

process. That, for me, has ended up in a lot of broken processes as a younger designer where the client or the commissioner doesn't feel like enough part of the process; they haven't contributed enough to the story of how the XYZ thing gets made. It just ends up in a lesser project, or something where everybody leaves it feeling like *I didn't quite get out of that what I needed to*.

With collaborations, where there's a stated purpose that both sides of the collaboration are going to be—or multiple sides of collaboration are going to be—contributing in equal measure to the creation of something, it's a much better dynamic. I like that dynamic so much more than a typical client/designer relationship. I have those kinds of relationships too; they're fine, that's how I get paid in other ways. But collaboration is just this joint imagination. There's a quote, I think it's from Steven Johnson, it's like, "Some of your best ideas are in other people's minds." That's one reason why critique and discussion and feedback are such an important part of the design process. The ideas are floating around out there with other people, and it comes out through conversation.

I super appreciate that part of collaborations where you have access to someone else's mind and the way they think, and it's not always coming up roses. My friend Layla, the New Zealand designer who I've collaborated with a lot in the past—I think probably almost every major collaboration we've had, we've fought. We think so differently, we're extremely different designers and different thinkers. Both her parents are big name artists in New Zealand, exhibited at the Venice Biennale, and she's really steeped in theory and critical theory and all that, and she's doing her PhD work now. And I'm like, *Oh, whatever*, a little more loosey goosey, and also critical theory makes me angry sometimes. We have gotten into these fights where I just get so mad and we have to work through it. But I still value the collaboration so much because we think things so differently. I learned so much from those collaborations with Layla, even though at some point or another I'm going to be angry about it. It still feels like I'm learning more from something like this than not doing a project with her.

## DH

The dynamics in a collaboration is something that I think about a lot. How do you set the conditions for a collaboration where it feels like everyone is contributing equally or feeling like they have agency or a stake? Do those



*Idiom #2: A Guide to Rock Stars*, Jayme Yen and Sara Ann Davidson, 2019. Image courtesy of the designer.

conditions also allow you to have that fight, then [the ability] to recover from that fight?

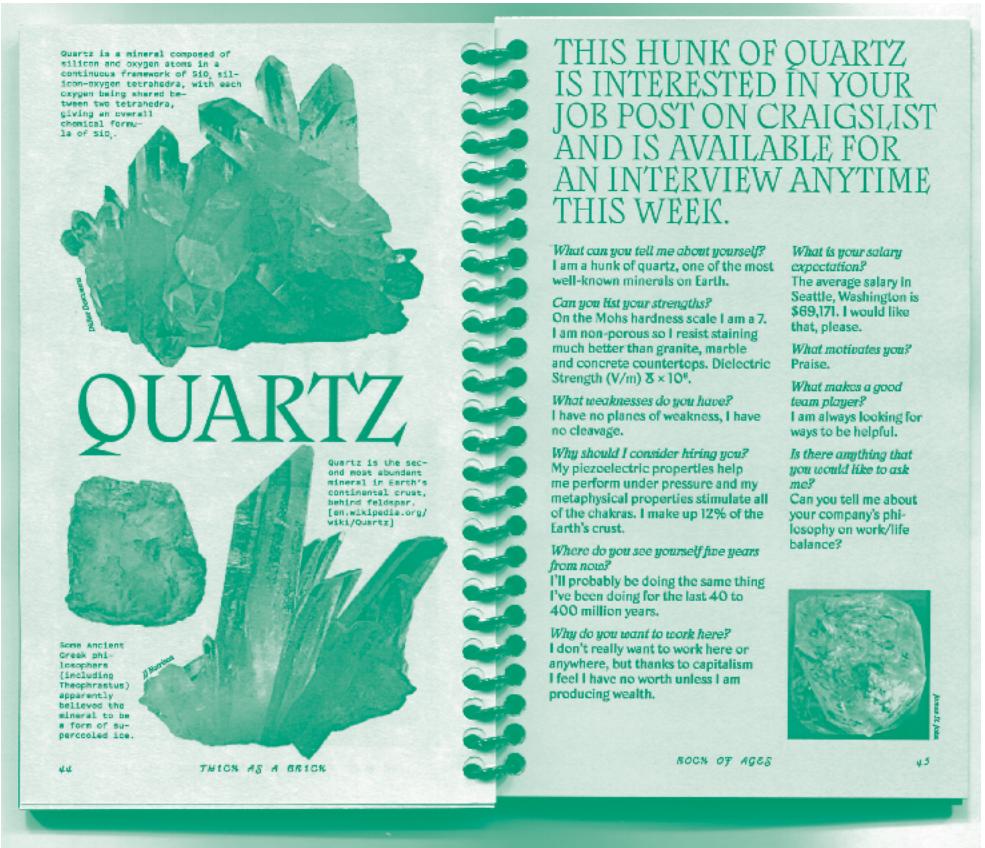
## JY

That's a good question. I always have to step back from these fights with Layla and calm down. I tend to be the more emotional one in our collaborative work. Calm down and think things through a little bit. Even if I had to redo some of the projects that we've done together, from the get-go I probably should have tried to make things clearer, try to communicate clearer.

I have to say, Tom, one of the things that I really like about our collaboration for the festival is how we share one email inbox. We're constantly reviewing emails, and we're writing emails. I would say 90% of what we do is writing emails. There're so many emails. We're writing emails to different advisors, to exhibitors, to other people we want to work with, to our funding people. One of us will write a draft and then send a note to the other person to say, "Hey, it's in the draft box. Do you want to take a look at it?" Then generally, I think we've gotten to this point where we have done this so many

times that we've agreed on—for Makeready, especially—the boilerplate information that needs to get sent out.

So I think if I were to redo some of these past collaborations with Layla, I'd probably spend more time being thoughtful about the way we communicate with each other and how we make sure that our expectations are meeting up in similar or the same ways, even if it takes a little while to get there. Because she's a really close friend of mine too, and we've had a close friendship before we really started to collaborate together, I think, maybe [we were] relying on that a little bit too much to be like, *Oh, we understand what we're talking about*, then realizing [that] actually we don't, really. We're not really on the same page about this. Spending the time on making sure that the communication is clear and the expectations are clear, even if it takes a lot of the time of the collaboration, is a super critical part of making sure that everyone's getting out of it what they need to get out of it, and the project moves forward.



*Idiom #2: A Guide to Rock Stars,*  
Jayme Yen and  
Sara Ann Davidson,  
2019. Image  
courtesy of the  
designer.

TE

I think all that's exactly right. I appreciate our collaboration for the same reasons. Having similar expectations, having a similar level of laziness, which is really important. Also knowing that none of this is even going to happen if we started arguing about anything. I think part of that goes to other collaborations that I've had with others, that being able to dial back your defensiveness about your own ideas or taking your ego out, like you talked about earlier, and having confidence in your own approach to things or explaining way of things, but also the ability to compromise or let go of ideas that you're holding onto tightly, I think, is really important. That kind of attitude I feel like you can only develop after a long time of experience. It's hard to just go in cold with that, after being a student.

DH

I have one last question. It's kind of an either/or question, you can choose one to answer or choose both. Are there any projects, yours or

## THIS HUNK OF QUARTZ IS INTERESTED IN YOUR JOB POST ON CRAIGSLIST AND IS AVAILABLE FOR AN INTERVIEW ANYTIME THIS WEEK.

**What can you tell me about yourself?**  
I am a hunk of quartz, one of the most well-known minerals on Earth.

**Can you list your strengths?**  
On the Mohs hardness scale I am a 7. I am non-porous so I resist staining much better than granite, marble and concrete countertops. Dielectric Strength (V/m)  $8 \times 10^9$ .

**What weaknesses do you have?**  
I have no planes of weakness, I have no cleavage.

**Why should I consider hiring you?**  
My piezoelectric properties help me perform under pressure and my metaphysical properties stimulate all of the chakras. I make up 12% of the Earth's crust.

**Where do you see yourself five years from now?**  
I'll probably be doing the same thing I've been doing for the last 40 to 400 million years.

**Why do you want to work here?**  
I don't really want to work here or anywhere, but thanks to capitalism I feel I have no worth unless I am producing wealth.

**What is your salary expectation?**

The average salary in Seattle, Washington is \$69,171. I would like that, please.

**What motivates you?**  
Praise.

**What makes a good team player?**  
I am always looking for ways to be helpful.

**Is there anything that you would like to ask me?**

Can you tell me about your company's philosophy on work/life balance?



someone else's, that have been exciting you recently? And/or, what have you been reading?

JY

I would say that the work that Thick Press, Julie Cho and her collaborator are doing is really exciting because they're very productive. [Julie's] actually publishing stuff on a semi-regular basis and I know Julie has a family, she's got two daughters, and runs a practice and also teaches, and I'm like, *Dang, what am I doing? I'm not that busy!* Anybody who is particularly productive, I'm like, *Wow. I would love to have the energy and the brainpower to do that.* I'm super interested in how Thick Press is thinking about the publication experience and distribution and books in general.

In terms of the book that I'm reading: I have been reading a lot of fantasy books recently that are just a way to get through these days. To take a break when I'm otherwise working and/or teaching nonstop. I stopped reading fantasy novels because they were all kind of boring, and then I switched to regular

novels. I think the ones that I read recently that I just absolutely fell in love with was Bryan Washington's book. *Memorial* is incredible. I highly recommend it. I have never wanted two people to succeed more than the people in that book. It just struck me so hard. And then there's another one. Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*. I finally read that.

DH

I literally just read those two books!

JY

Really? They're so good! Back to back, it was like an amazing combination. It was just really incredible. I loved them, but now I'm back onto a fantasy—I just ended a fantasy series that was not so great for girl power, I'd say. It wasn't as feminist as it could be.

TE

My reading's kind of fallen off a bit this past year, and I realized the reason is that I used to get most of my reading done on the bus on my commute to work. It was always just a solid half hour, 45 minutes on a bad day, or a good day, that I could just power through a big chunk of text. Not having those quiet moments of the day means that when we're working from home, it's kind of like rolling out of bed, and maybe going outside for something, but then you're at work right away, and you don't have those transition times when I would normally get that reading done. But that said—I showed it earlier—I've been trying to read *Anna Karenina*.

JY

That's a big one.

TE

Oh, my God, it just goes forever. I read a lot of Russian literature back in college at UW. I took a whole year of Russian literature. What's nice about it is that it was originally serialized and so a chapter would come out in some Russian magazine or newspaper or something like once a week in the 1800s. What's nice about that in today's lifestyle is that each chapter is only like three pages long. You can read these nice little chunks of text; it's not like this 20-page chapter you have to put down halfway through and try to remember where you were at. I really appreciate [it]. That said, it's taking me forever to read. At the same time—I just happened to have these next to me here—I love Simon Hanselmann's comics. He does *Megg* and *Megg*. These are published by Fantagraphics.

They're just these absolutely disgusting group of friends—one of them's a witch and there's a bear and an owl and a cat, and the comments are just filthy. It's the exact opposite of really high literature. I love bouncing back and forth between them. Jacob Covey, who's the art director of Fantagraphics, does some really amazing work with production techniques. It has this transparent plastic jacket and fake medical bottle label, and then the book itself was printed on like different types of paper. Some comics are one color and some are full color.

DH

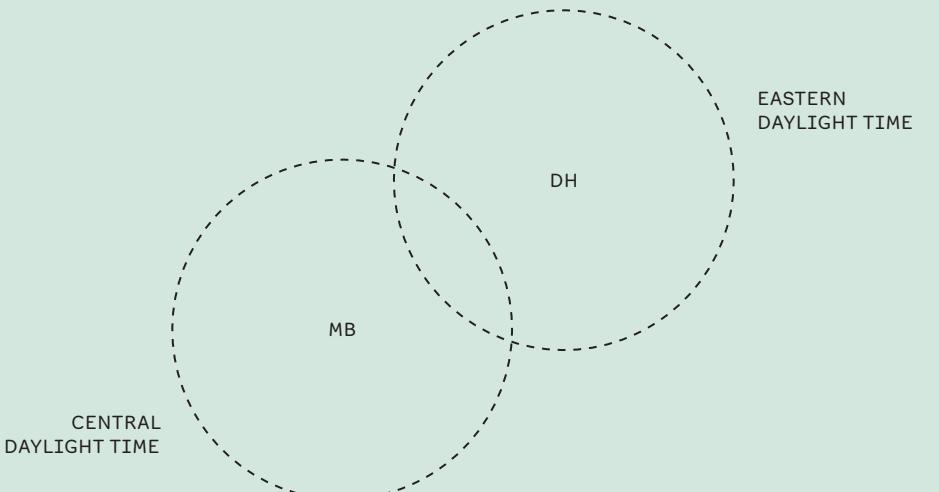
A graphic novel, speaking of worldbuilding, is like the ultimate form.

TE

Something that's been inspiring lately is the studio Polymode, which is Silas Munro and Brian Johnson, and they're based in opposite coasts. They're going to be part of Makeready. They've worked with Lucia | Marquand, where I work, in a freelance capacity. Talking to them now about an upcoming project, I'm really envious of them describing their workflow which is: when they take on a new project, they have this whole phase that they call "poetic research." They do a deep dive, like all the background, all the art, following any kind of little details down a rabbit hole to see where it goes, and then they end up with this collection of documents and art and photography and articles and music—like music is a really big part of it. They did a book on Terry Adkins with us last year, and they produced an actual playlist of music that they identified that was either directly connected to Terry Adkins or his network, or that they were just inspired by as they were coming up with all of this. The fact that they put kind of a term to this approach that they took to their work, and then thinking about how that enriches the whole experience far beyond what the book itself is ever going to have, is really exciting to think about on a whole other level.

DH

I was reading an interview with Mj Balvanera, the art director for Co-Conspirator Press, where she called books actions—the idea that there's a lot of labor that goes into a book, and then, when the book is in the world, it literally exists in the world in some way. It's not just a thing that exists in itself, but it's a thing that networks out in all these different ways, which is kind of what that poetic research phase sounds like.



Over the summer, I attended a virtual panel titled “Self Publishing as a Political, Democratic and Generous Practice” where graphic designer MJ Balvanera spoke on alongside Co-Conspirator Press co-workers Lindsey Eichenberger and Nicole Kelly and author Meenadchi.<sup>1</sup> They described the process of working on Meenadchi’s *Decolonizing Non-Violent Communication* in relational terms: intentional, trusting, and an exercise in consent. This was supported by their existing relationships stemming from a series of workshops that Meenadchi did with the Feminist Center for Creative Work, the sister organization of the press.

I wanted to talk more with Balvanera about this relational way of working from a graphic design perspective. I reached out to Balvanera during a period of transition, when she just stepped back from the Press and moved from Los Angeles, California to Mexico City, Mexico. We discussed publishing and its ability to redistribute resources, being critical of design as a design practice, and design as a means of self expression, both creative and political.

#### DAPHNE HSU

To start off, what is really present for you right now? What are you working on, or what is something that you’ve been excited about recently that you’ve worked on?

#### MJ BALVANERA

That’s a funny question because right now is a very strange time for me. I had been working at the Co-Conspirator Press, which is part of the Feminist Center for Creative Work. They just changed their name, so it was the Women’s Center for Creative Work, now it’s the Feminist Center for Creative Work. The Feminist Center for Creative Work is like a nucleus and Co-Conspirator Press was born as an offshoot or a branch of it, and I had been working on and off with the Feminist Center for Creative Work for five years – almost six, actually, coming in June. As of a couple of months ago, I decided to step back from my role there and I don’t really have a plan of where I’m going and what I’m doing. I had been living in Los Angeles for five years, since I started working at the Feminist Center. Because of the pandemic and the shift in the way that we all work and we all connect, I decided to move back home to Mexico. I’m now in Mexico City. Even though I don’t have a plan right now, I guess I’m just thinking about what the next steps are and how those can encompass my community in Mexico City, which I haven’t really been a part of for a long time since I moved to LA. So no clear answer, just questions.

#### DH

That’s exciting. You’re in a transitional period, but starting to pull things together and forging your own path. How has your understanding of the book as a medium evolved or changed through your collaborations with authors? During the pandemic, I read a little bit about how thinking about the redistribution of materials has become even more important to you. What possibilities does the book hold for you?

#### MB

When I was in grad school, I was thinking, *How can I reinvent the wheel of a book to be something that’s completely participatory, but it’s on paper, so it has to be [experienced] one at a time and it’s not really the internet and it’s all these factors?*

The Press started in 2019 – it started in about March of 2019, we don’t have a specific date. We had this risograph that’s been forgotten in the back room. And I like books, I like typography, I like coil binding, so let’s just

make a book and see what happens. Even with the first book we did, which is *Decolonizing Non-Violent Communication*, the design of it isn’t really re-inventing anything. It uses a quite simple kind of sans serif typeface with two colors and illustrations made by a peer of mine at the Feminist Center, Hana Ward, which are also beautiful but quite simple. It was, in a way, not really ticking off my boxes of hyper-conceptual/let’s really think about this/let’s put all this kind of critical conceptual theory into it. It’s for the joy of making a book.

We developed a business really quickly – kind of forcibly – because the book just took off and had a life of its own. That got me thinking about the book in a different way. Instead of thinking about it as, *What else could it be and how can I transform this?* which was very much the mentality that I had coming into it, it was like, *No, actually, how do I distribute it in very real ways?* So I had to learn about consignment and wholesale and e-commerce. Simultaneously I was actually working for a start-up e-commerce brand, which is like two sides of the coin. But I was listening to what they were saying, like upsell modules and conversion rates and things like that, and I was like, *Wait, we should apply that.* I started thinking about the book much more in a physical way.

The aspect of redistribution, I think, could be taken as hyper-conceptually, like, *Where does this go?* Redistribution for us, for a long time, quite simply meant that when someone pays for a book, that money is going to the author, which in itself is redistribution because we specifically work with authors who come from underrepresented communities in the publishing world, and then the other part goes to the Press. What we do with our money at the Press is we redistribute to more authors, so it becomes this rhizomatic web of connections with people. One hand it’s money, and then it becomes this whole network of where this money is going and what we’re doing with it. On the other hand, the redistribution of resources is the content. The content that the Press was choosing to publish was extremely self-explanatory. It is a resource in itself because it is guiding you towards something, hopefully for improvement. I really don’t want to say – because they’re not self-help books; I just lack a better word to describe them. They’re resource books, right? So, again, you’re redistributing resources: the resources that we had was this content that we had available and that the authors were making available to us, and we were really lucky to have them want to work with us.

<sup>1</sup> Mj Balvanera, Lindsey Eichenberger, Nicole Kelly, and Meenadchi, panelists, “Self Publishing as a Political, Democratic and Generous Practice,” (panel discussion, Allied Media Conference, Zoom, July 26, 2020).

During the pandemic, what became really clear was that the interest for the books and the content in the books, well, it was not at all specific to isolation and digital communities and all these things that we've all experienced throughout the pandemic. The interest for the books kept on growing and kept on growing. That was interesting in a very non-conceptual way; it was just very observatory in a how-to-run-a-business kind of way, like, *Whoa, people are actually still really interested in this.* That got us thinking about, well, what is the value of the book, especially at a time where we can't have physical community, and we're very much isolated? As opposed to the internet, where one would think that the internet would become the main place where one would want to engage in this kind of content? But it wasn't like that—everyone was buying the books and I think the connection to actual physicality was really important to people.

I also think that, at the beginning, I had a hard time as a designer leaving blank spaces, or even lines for people to write into the books. I think, in the graphic design world, we think of books as this precious object, that if the pages just got slightly turned or something, we're like, *Oh no, my book.* At the end, I think that that part of leaving space for people to write in and make the book their own was really special to people, and it really resonated with people, which then gives the book a whole new cycle and new meaning, because when someone owns this book and starts to write into the book, it is theirs. It got me thinking a lot about what happens to the book after the book is done. Also as designers, we tend to be like, *Okay, it's done printing it's been bound.* Whatever, next project. I've really been thinking a lot about how the book becomes something else, each time it's in someone else's hands and has a different meaning every time.

## DH

I have so many questions coming off of what you're talking about. Well, first, with the book, I'm hearing it went from feeling like this object in itself that you could apply a lot of conceptual ideas to, to then thinking about, *What is the network around the book? What's the community around it? How does it get made? Who will it reach?* Even thinking conceptually about the business model, then you're starting to think about how this is affecting other people, which I think is really powerful; you're using the book as a medium that starts to kind of affect all these other processes. You talked a little bit

about the distribution model, using your knowledge from the e-commerce job that you had. What kind of distribution decisions have you made that support the idea of a redistribution, but then also reach the communities or the publics that you want to reach?

## MB

I think a lot of the way that I think about business comes from this stark contrast of working in non-profit versus insanely capitalistic start-up environments; [there] is a little bit of a push-pull, so you give in some areas, and that allows you to, again, redistribute resources so you're able to kind of have more leeway in other areas. Tangibly, what this means is very concrete decisions of even starting with the business of the price of the book. There is a very specific way that we calculate the price of the book, which is the bare minimum that we can make a profit off of. But also we make a decision that, I think, 80% of the entire print run we sell directly on our website because that is where we get the most income. We keep 100% of the profits, whereas when we do wholesale—we only do wholesale, we don't do consignment because consignment is a little bit confusing—we see it more as a marketing strategy.

A clear example of that is sending our books to Printed Matter and having them post about. It is a huge opportunity for the Press because that is a huge platform of people that we know would want to purchase our books. Even though we're making less money off of those books that go to Printed Matter, we know that in the end it'll come back around. Then that allows us to think, *Who else do we want to engage in in terms of wholesale?*

The financial aspect of engaging with more communities in terms of wholesale doesn't feel that important because we are covering most of the costs through our direct-to-consumer model on our website. We're able to do wholesale with community partners that we really, really, really, really want to engage with, and that includes people specifically in Los Angeles, in communities in Los Angeles that are often overlooked in terms of bookstores and communities. We've been able to send books all the way to Europe, which is a huge deal. Something that's a very big deal for me is that we've been able to see our books in Mexico. We've been able to give our books away for free in Mexico. Yes, they're in English and it's not completely accessible for the community in Mexico, but I think, maybe someone picks them up and is like, *Wouldn't it be amazing to make*

*this book in Spanish now?* And then you start to translate and start to grow the network to places where these books can be purchased and seen, so I think it's also a very long-term plan. It can't just be one day, like, *Okay, we're going to go to all these communities and everyone's going to love us.* I think you have to be very aware of the placement in different communities and the approach with which you engage different communities and the long-term plan, what side steps towards your very clear goal do you have to take in order to reach that goal.

## DH

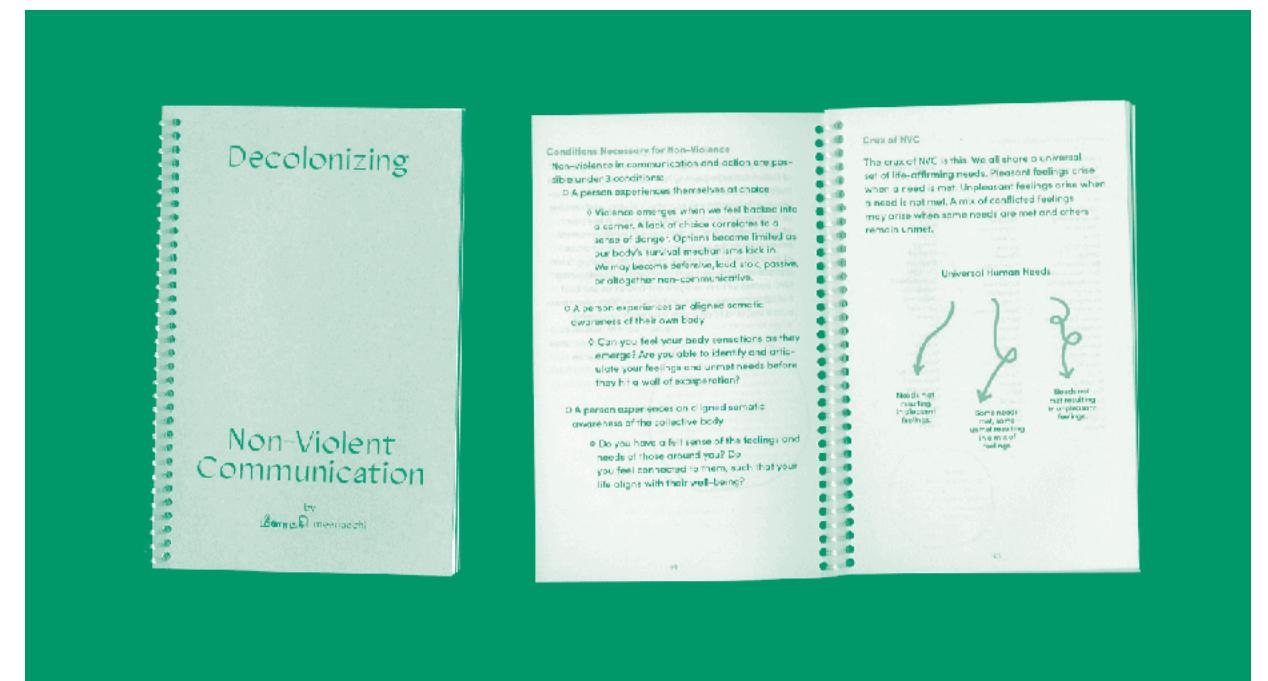
Do you know Kitchen Table Press? I read in this essay by Barbara Smith, one of the cofounders, about how they wanted specifically to reach different communities of color, so they would go to conferences or concerts or talks to give out books.

Does Co-Conspirator Press engage any art book fairs? For example, I saw y'all speak at Allied Media Conference, and I feel like that is a place where a lot of values start aligning.

## MB

Engaging with communities of color is really important because the team is made up of

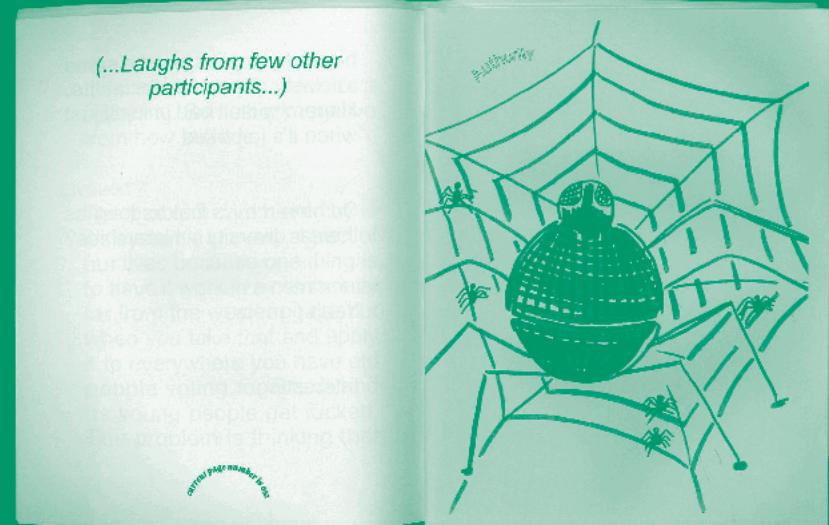
*Decolonizing Non-Violent Communication* by Meenadchi, designed by Mj Balvanera, published by Co-Conspirator Press, 2019. Images courtesy of the designer.



people of color, so I think that that is inherent. I don't think we've had to talk about it in terms of distribution. We've also been really fortunate than most of the authors that we've worked with—in fact, all of the authors we've worked with—are people of color, and most of the authors we've worked with are Black. We've been fortunate in the way that they've wanted to work with us. Just being able to engage with the content that our authors have created is really, really fortunate and inspiring. There haven't really been any specific strategies that we as a team have sat down and thought, *Oh, how do we engage specifically buyers of color or Black readers?* I think that the content and the books that have been published have inherently guided that kind of public.

As I transition out and the team is changing and reformatting their principles, I think that may be a different answer in a couple of weeks or maybe in a couple of months. This is just coming from me. When we do book fairs or we do conferences, it doesn't come from a place of specifically trying to target specific communities, but it comes from a place of thinking, *Let's have people see what we're doing.*

For me, something that's really important is I know every time we sell the book, the money goes to the author. That's always been



*A Play on Issues in Graphic Design*, Mj Balvanera, book documentation of a workshop, 2017. Image courtesy of the designer.

the number one part of it, just making sure that the authors can even make a livelihood out of their work. Going to a book fair and going to a conference is always like, *Okay, here's this book and you should buy it*. So again, it becomes a marketing strategy and just trying to make sure that the authors that we work with are fairly represented.

We actually didn't get to go to that many book fairs because when we started really taking off, the pandemic hit, so that didn't really happen for us. But navigating those worlds, where authors are primarily white authors and publishers are primarily white publishers, the fact of being there and presenting the books that we're presenting doesn't have to scream and shout, "Oh, we're all underrepresented communities." It's just a matter of being there and showing a different side of what publishing can be.

Giving talks is especially important to me because you engage in different communities. I've actually had a lot of students reach out and be like, "What about this, what about that?" and it's really fun for me to be able to continue to have the conversation.

#### DH

I also have really appreciated the talks and panels because in doing these you're also sharing out a different model of design or a

different model of publishing that's really intentional, that's trying to counter hegemonic structures. For me that has been like, *Oh yes, there's a model for me for this* to be thinking intentionally about design choices, but then also which communities I want to work with and want to try to speak to.

#### MB

Back in 2018 or '17, there was a book made by the original founders of the Feminist Center called *A Feminist Organization's Handbook*. It was basically an explanation with graphs of how you create a feminist center. At the time the Feminist Center was exploding, and everyone was talking about it, and it was like *Well, it's not just my information and me hoarding how this can be done*. The intention is *Let's have 15 other presses that work exactly like this*, and that is the only way to really make significant change. Co-Conspirator Press is not going to make change in three days. I believe that—not even three days—like ever by itself. I really strongly believe that the only change that we are obligated to make as a change is the authors and representation and the work that we do with specifically the authors. And from there it's like, *Well, the more presses that exist that are exactly like this one, the better* because it means more authors are getting published, more editors are working, and more designers,

and everyone is hopefully of underrepresented communities. So it's just more of that.

#### DH

That reminds me of another thing that the Kitchen Table Press essay said. Without Kitchen Table Press having been around in the 70s, we wouldn't have heard certain voices—voices from women of color, from lesbians. I really love listening to you talk about the authors, centering the authors, thinking about what are the possibilities for the press to help to serve these authors.

I wanted to ask about something that you said in an interview with *Off-Kilter*. You were asked a question about print media and self-publishing, and you said there's a lot of value in having no digital footprint for what you're doing. How are you thinking about the press and these physical books in relation to the internet? In [my] educational institution, there has been a lot of questioning of the value of the institution as it goes online. If stuff is online, does that mean that education is more accessible? But because we're all in Zoom, it's also leaving some students out because they don't have an internet connection or maybe their home lives aren't necessarily conducive to an educational setting. What I'm circling around is: what do you think the value is in not having a digital footprint when so many things are online?

#### MB

To start with, I think that this question is circulating the periphery of accessibility and what that means. Accessibility for me as a designer has always been a contentious conversation because we are taught that accessibility is a defined, 100% accessible kind of goal that you have to reach as a designer. The reality is that accessibility is never going to be 100% for everyone and it's really complicated. So, of course, the questions become "What is accessible for whom?" That's an important question about representation and justice in general. Even when you're doing books and printed matter, you can have a conversation about accessibility in terms of "who lives in an area that is going to be able to receive this?" In the United States, most people would be able to receive books by mail, but I know we've had a lot of conflict with books being shipped to Mexico and other areas. So they're not 100% accessible.

The reality is that we sell the books on the internet, but I think the value of the book versus having it just be online... several

things: the first one that I'm thinking of right now is the physicality of it and the intimacy of it. Especially because these are resource books, one has to sit with them and really question what you're reading. The fact that you can close it up, leave it, and then come back to it another day is really important. The fact that you can take a pen to paper and write your thoughts in it is really important. We can simulate that kind of interaction online, simply with Google Docs or something like that. But I do think there's a lot of value in being able to have a physical interaction with the content that you're processing.

I also think that, while our books are not specifically radical political content, self-publishing is important because you're able to publish whatever you want without government or other entities that have access to the internet and surveillance being there and seeing what you're doing. So again, we're not publishing how to make Molotov bombs, but there is a little bit of *it's nicer to have it on paper because it's intimate and it's not that accessible to anyone who wants to see what we're doing*. That feels important, especially the more time we spend on the internet, the more people know what you're doing. All of these aspects circulate the periphery of the idea that books are better than the internet!

Also, to be very transparent, a lot of these things come from a very personal standpoint: I like books, I do not like designing websites. The value of that also comes from like, *What does the team want to do? The people who are making this project work—what do we want to do?* Books are really special because we get excited about paper choices and coils and different types of bindings. I think everyone who's in the publishing world will tell you that it's so much more important to engage in a book physically.

There's a lot of questions like, *Is the book losing value because of the internet?* I know this isn't your question, but I've been asked this question several times, and I think every time I answer it, I think it's just that the big books, like the equivalent of *Harry Potter* at this time, are not necessarily having to be printed on paper. But in contrast, the self-publishing world is exploding and there's seven more presses every day and that's great, that's exciting because we're going back to printed materials in a way that feels a lot more political and intentional, so it's an exciting time for printed materials.

DH

You've talked a little bit in other venues about being really intentional with your paper choice, where you're sourcing things from, which typefaces you're using specifically from women, non-binary folks, and people of color. I'm also wondering how you think about these design choices in terms of who you want to speak to? With these resource books, how do you think about making them easy to write in? How do those choices reflect the types of communities that the books are speaking to?

MB

That's a really interesting question and I hadn't really thought about it, and the reason I hadn't really thought about it is—just like a little bit of background on me: I studied visual communication in Mexico City. I studied in a school that was very influenced by Swiss graphic design and Swiss standards. I now have the language to say that I was rejecting it at the time. I was just like, *No, I hate this. I don't want to do this ever again.* I was really having a physical adverse reaction to this idea of *this is your client, design for them!* Everyone is different, hierarchy puts people in boxes. This is the idea of accessibility too—you're taught accessibility, especially in undergrad, as this very defined thing. For me it was: there has to be 35 to 45 characters per line in a paragraph for you to be able to read it. I'm highly, highly dyslexic so I'm like, "You can put one letter per line and I'm not going to read it." I can't read; it's really difficult for me. This idea of what decisions you can make for people to be more engaged feels really complicated for me, and not to say that there aren't decisions that definitely could influence that. When I'm designing and when I'm starting to think about a book, I'm not really thinking about who's going to read it; I'm thinking about the relationship specifically between me and the author.

We have—like in graphic design—normal standards, like an interview with the author. They tell me what they're interested in and then I go back and make a first round of design. I think at first, I'm kind of embarrassed that this is how I work because it's not how a designer should work. But now I'm going to be like, *No, I feel like using design as a means of self expression is also valid.* It's the thought process that I'm going through now. For me, these books are means of self-expression, even though it's not my content and it's not specifically my press, and I am not the target audience. I do feel like an aspect of being genuine comes through

when it happens that way. In community and in collaboration with the author, the message will come across to whoever wants to receive the message, and whoever doesn't would not be interested anyways. I think design as a means for self-expression doesn't mean I'm getting all Jackson Pollock on the book. It means that for myself, it is important to use typefaces made by women or non-binary folks or people of color. Plus I think it represents the concept of the author. Or for me, it is important to use paper that is recycled or that is not coming from a humongous paper mill, but also this other alternative has a really nice color.

It's balancing these self-made decisions with more important decisions that affect the author, that affect the outcome of the book, the price of the book. It's again push-pulling all of these decisions. When making space for writing in the book and things like that, I think that's where more traditional design stuff comes in, where I'll just print it and write in myself really big, really small, and try to find a medium. I'm not really thinking of how specific communities write and engage with the content.

DH

I also had a very Swiss undergrad visual communication design program and towards the tail end of it, I was like, *Oh, there are all these other ways that people are doing design that maybe speak to me a bit more.* They're less kind of rule-driven or needing to justify a choice in a way that feels very forced. On your website, you have a few projects that I think engage really critically with graphic design: *A Play on Issues in Graphic Design and Hating Design as a Design Practice.* Being very skeptical of graphic design or the way that people are practicing it in some studio environments or some corporate environments resonates with me. Could talk a little bit more about how this criticality has shaped your perspective? Are there any questions that you're still grappling with?

MB

So, narrative: what happened is I graduated undergrad and I left and I was like *What? I hate all of this.* I'm not sure why I decided to jump straight into an MFA program. I went to Otis, and the program was everything I think I was looking for in terms of having the space to think about these things and to really question. The first project I did was *Hating Design as a Design Practice*, and I did that in collaboration with an amazing designer, Tina Miyakawa. What we were starting to get at was this idea of

responsibility as a graphic designer and what that means in pushing yourself. That is where the idea of conversation as a form of design started to circulate for me. It's something that I still really think about. In every talk and every conversation [like this one] with you, I grow new things about what I'm trying to do. [Tina and I] started having conversations about: Why are you even doing design? Why were you doing design when you first started? Why do you think you're doing design once you leave school?

These things really shift because an MFA program is meant to really push you to the very limit of who you are as a person. That's where we were at and we wanted to publish the audio of those conversations. I think we were strongly pushed to make a physical object, a printed object, because that is graphic design. Then we were like, *No. Why does design have to be a printed object?* but then we were like, *Okay, we need credit for this class so let's try to make something.* We decided to make this broadsheet that is 24-inches by 36-inches or something, and it's printed in four colors. I hated typography when I first got into undergrad and even grad school, which is crazy because that's all I do now, but I was exploring with typefaces and communicating everything typographically. Tina

was working with colors and being more expressive with colors. What ended up happening was a collage of ideas, without a grid, without a structure. We actually printed segments of it and then stuck them on with masking tape onto a huge piece of paper and then scanned it and sent that to print. The reflections in there are very intimate—like very, very intimate, "I don't know if I want to be doing this."

Something that also really sticks with me about that project is one of the conclusions I came to is I can't be a good designer if I'm not a good person. For everything, you know, you can't be a good economist if you're not a good person. But specifically with design, what happens is that your role is to communicate ideas to the general public. If you're working as a vessel of communication and your communication is blinded by ideas that are exploitative and exclusionary and shitty, you're going to communicate shitty stuff. You're communicating things on a mass scale, whether it is 200 copies of a book or a billboard. I still have a bunch of those [broadsheets] and I give them away for free for anyone who wants them. It's a kindergarten idea of the redistribution of resources.

With the second project you referenced, *A Play on Graphic Design Issues*, that

*Experiments in Joy: A Workbook*, compiled by Gabrielle Civil, designed by Mj Balvanera, published by Co-Conspirator Press, 2019. Images courtesy of the designer.





*Hating Design as a Design Practice*,  
Mj Balvanera and  
Tina Miyakawa, 2017.  
Image courtesy of  
the designer.

was talking about my issues with accessibility, universality, standardization, hierarchy, and even our role as designers coming in as experts and being like, *This is what I'm going to do for you*. And it's like, *No, you have to listen to what, in this case, what the author wants and what the author wants to communicate*. On a broader scale, it's just being able to not be hierarchical about the design process. I had a bunch of people come together and draw their idea of what, for example, authority or universality or standardization was to them. Again, that was a conversation. Even now I'm realizing conversations are really important in the graphic design practice, even though the outcome is not a physical thing. You then turn that into a physical thing and it really informs the way that you work, which is also kind of the way that you [Daphne] are working now.

When I graduated, I was at a point where I didn't want to design anything because it just feels so complicated, even if you think about hierarchy or authority or capitalism. We're all working on our little MacBook Pro computers. It's a very privileged discipline in itself. It just became very existential and very dark for a while. The Press was a way for me to sit down with those feelings and try to find a middle ground. Especially with regard to just running a business and being very realistic about the work, there's all these crazy ideas

that one can do and there's all these things that one can reject, but at the end of the day, I need to make an income out of the thing that I have produced, and how do I do that? You know you can't have 100% illegible typography on this book, it has to be legible—you just have to make those decisions. That's where I am now, I think all these things. I agree with all these things that I was thinking in the grad program, but there has to be a tangible way to apply them, otherwise you just can't be a designer or anything, it becomes too intense.

#### DH

Especially in education, and even in conversations, you're presented with this idea that possibilities are endless, and there's also all these limitations and contradictions and things to think about. But then in actually needing to work, it's very practical. *Okay, what do I need to get done? What are some decisions so that I can make that resonate with me, but will also get people paid?* Being in reality is very different.

#### MB

It becomes really real. I think a lot of the work that I've been doing apart from the Press is making ads for e-commerce sites. It feels like, *No, I did not just do an MFA program for this*, but then it's like, *Wait, no, I need to pay rent and I need to eat and I like to enjoy my life and*

*I like to travel.* Sometimes I even think about it as redistributing those resources: they pay me for me to be able to work at the Press, or I'm not going to be working at the Press anymore but maybe I'll start my own press. I'll keep doing these ads for Facebook because that's what's going to finance a new press and a new kind of way of thinking. It doesn't have to be black and white, like rejecting everything capitalistic, but a grayscale.

#### DH

Thinking ahead about how things are still formulating, you talked a little bit about the Press potentially inspiring other presses. What other thoughts do you have around what you would like the future for Co-Conspirator Press to be, or even design and publishing in general? What kind of world would you like to see the books living in?

#### MB

It feels broad and it feels weird because I'm not a part of the Press anymore so I'm actually just really excited about what they're going to be doing with the Press moving forward. The reality is that there are so many presses out there that are doing so many amazing things. It's exciting to see what everyone is doing with different printed materials and especially what everyone is doing with the risograph. I feel like everyone I know has a risograph now and everyone's putting it to different uses. People are doing commissioned work, like, "Send us your files and we'll print for you;" people are making books; people are doing stuff for free and redistributing on the risograph. I'm hoping for a place where there is more of that and more inspiring ideas and more adventures. Maybe some of them work and some of them don't work, but the experience of just meeting more people and hearing what they want to do—it's like when you go to the art supply store and you buy paint and it's really exciting because every single person who's buying that bottle of paint is going to be doing something completely different with it. And it could just be black acrylic, but something different is going to happen. I think that way about paper, and I think that way about typefaces, and I think that way about inks. The more people who are engaging with paper and inks and typefaces and content, the more really cool stuff is going to be coming out.

I also feel like this environment that we grew up in is extremely competitive. It just drills this idea in your head that you have to be

the best and everyone around you is an idiot and you have to put them down. Something that I've really learned and valued, especially from the Feminist Center and from my time in LA and at Otis, is being like, *No, the more people who are doing cool stuff just like you, the better*, because then you search for community. You start to see really amazing projects. It becomes a rhizomatic network of people doing really great stuff. I can't visualize exactly what the future looks like, I just want more of it. More people to be able to do more stuff.

#### DH

That's beautiful. I think in my graduate work in thinking about interdependence, it's also about what inspires what, what legacy of influences have I come from. A lot of the writing that I've been doing has been like, "These are all the things that influence me, and then here's a project that kind of relates to it." Maybe you relate to that. What history of influences are you working from? Or what personal influences or models are you taking from or building upon?

#### MB

I didn't really realize this until I moved away from Mexico, but Mexico and Mexican culture and Mexican visual culture play a huge impact in the way that I even think. It becomes very inherent to me, but it's also very specific to me. I know a lot of Mexican designers that design very differently from me, or at least I think it's different. It's not that there is one specific visual culture in Mexico that is "A equals B, and therefore this is how I design." It's more like I picked up on a lot of very saturated visuals which are clearly Mexican visuals. There's no way around that. That has really informed the way that I like designing, like layering and colors and plus this and plus that and plus that. That's pretty obvious to me just in terms of visuals. Obviously I'm super influenced by my formal education, which is Swiss design. I'm not going to be the person who's going to sit down and do hand lettering—my Swiss education won't allow it. I could one day, I don't know. Both of these things live simultaneously for me, which is actually in itself an exploration of identity for myself being a Mexican designer and then navigating all of these American circles.

I went to Los Angeles, which is where postmodernism was born and vomited all over the city and that is in there, somehow. Yet coming back home to Mexico and looking at Mexican design, it all feels very Swiss. I think it's very much the influence of capitalism and aspiration

to the United States and to Europe, which is very dominant, especially in more privileged circles here. All of that is circulating in my head. This is just in terms of aesthetics. I also don't think about it when I'm making stuff, I'm just like, *Okay, finished*. Then I'll think about it a couple of weeks later and I'm like, *Oh no, I see where this is coming from*, which is again the idea of design as self-expression. Again, the shame that one carries about thinking about design as self-expression because we're taught that it has to be objective, it has to be for the community and not for yourself—but, whatever. That's how I'm feeling now. So that's all in terms of visuals.

In terms of politics and the importance of the work that I'm doing, I'm really, really influenced by coming from Mexico again. Mexico has a very, very deep history with political printmaking and self-publishing. I don't think in the way that we know it now, but in the way of letterpress and letterpress posters—especially in the southern state of Oaxaca, it's still to this day super important. Politics have always been important to me personally. Printmaking venn-diagram-overlapping with politics feels natural. I think that's because of the way that I grew up. Also, the feminist movement in Mexico, which has become so powerful in the last five to ten years. That's a huge influence for me—what more radical and more amazing feminists than myself are doing and want to be doing in Mexico is something that's really circulating in my mind right now. I see that when I'm making things—I don't know if it's clear, so I'm not an artist—but all these things are in my head when trying to make stuff.

**DH**

A question to end on: one thing that I've been thinking about with grad school—like you said, it really pushes you to your limits of who you are and what you think of graphic design. The RISD program is a lot of making projects very quickly and not finishing them; the work is really in the idea. One thing I've been wondering about is: *After this, how do I maintain something that's more long-term? How do I kind of keep things going for myself?*

How do you think about maintenance? How do you think about momentum, or what do you do when you get stuck? How do you kind of maintain things for yourself?

**MB**

I feel like your question really resonates with how I was feeling when I graduated. What am I supposed to do now? What I've learned is

to just be patient with myself and give myself room to not work on things for six months if I don't want to because I'm tired. I've also actually noticed that what I'm craving is some kind of creative outlet. And that, for me, is graphic design because that's what I chose to go to school with, but it's not the only thing. This is ridiculous, but you can quote me on this—something that is a creative outlet is playing *Roller Coaster Tycoon*. I like to play *The Sims* and make modernist houses in it. What I feel with that is that it's not really like every single thing that you do in your spare time has to be this deeply conceptual and thoughtful thing. At the end it actually relates back to that project with the newsprint—you can't be a good designer if you're not a good person. To me, what it relates back to you is to give yourself the chance to enjoy what you're doing rather than having to have it be this revolutionary idea, like reinventing the wheel. That's what I was coming out of grad school with: *I'm going to reinvent graphic design, especially in Mexico and they'll see (the people in my undergrad.)* I was like, *No, I don't owe them shit. I can just enjoy my life and use design as a means of self-expression because that's why I wanted to do design.* I think everyone wants to study design for different reasons, so again, this is deeply personal. But if you think about procrastinating or watching Netflix or just going on a walk as part of your process, then it doesn't feel like, *Shit, I'm wasting my time*. It's like, *No, actually you're thinking*, and that's also a very, very important part of the process. It can take three years or it can take three weeks, but one day I feel like one just wakes up and it's like, *Okay, I'm ready now. Let's make something.*

# May 2021 –

## 4.1 DEAR READER, A NOTE IN CLOSING

How far are you in the future? Where are you reading this? Are you still with me?

It's now May 2021. Forty percent of adults in the US have been vaccinated. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that fully vaccinated people can shed their masks indoors and outdoors. However, the pandemic still rages, most sharply in India and South America. The virus isn't eradicated and the future remains uncertain.

This book began by asking how graphic designers can support visions and systems of interdependence from a grassroots perspective. I don't fully answer the question. Rather, the text and the projects point to ways of thinking about accessibility, circulation, reciprocity, and collaboration. I recognize the limits of my graduate work, which was conceived within the graphic design bubble at RISD. Going forward from the institution means going more public and taking more risks in building and working with communities outside of school. It also means longer engagements. My thinking around accessibility is also limited to my own identity as an able-bodied cis straight Asian American woman. I intend to learn more about the accessibility concerns and work done by disabled communities. In addition, as humans, we are part of a global environmental ecosystem—one that's threatened by climate change. I also intend to learn more about sustainability and maintenance. To work meaningfully on access and interdependence means to continue collaborating, talking, learning, researching, and responding to existing conditions.

Some lingering questions for the very near future...

*How can graphic design encourage the exchange of a plurality of viewpoints without losing the nuances of specificity?*

*How can the graphic design process exude abundance in opposition to a capitalist economy that favors scarcity?*

*How do graphic designers work with collaborators and participants in ways that foster and maintain longer and deeper engagements?*

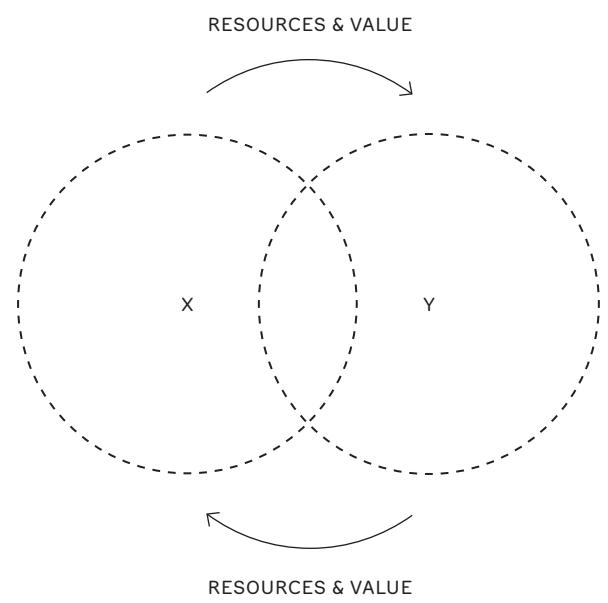


FIG. 16 – INTERDEPENDENT RELATIONSHIP

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To my interviewees Mary Welcome, Keetra Dean Dixon, Kelsey Elder, Jayme Yen, Tom Eykemans, and Mj Balvanera: thank you for your time and generous conversation. Hope to talk soon.

## SIGNATURES

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Graphic Design in the Department of Graphic Design of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

by Daphne Hsu  
2021

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## COLOPHON

Refiguring Relations

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### TYPE

Courier Sans LL  
James Goggin, Lineto, 2016

Arnhem

Fred Smeijers, TYPE BY, 2002

### PAPER

Interior: 100# Mohawk  
Superfine Eggshell Ultrawhite  
Text + 100# McCoy Silk Text

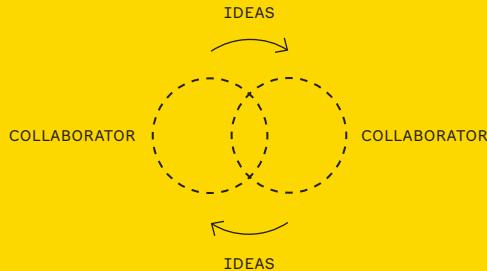
Covers: 100# Mohawk Superfine  
Eggshell Ultrawhite Cover

### PRINTING

Kirkwood Printing Company

**G**  
*Garden Reader* → Proj. L  
gatekeeping → 3.5, 3.6, Proj. H, Proj. I

**H**  
hierarchy → 2.5, Int. 1, Int. 2  
hosting → 2.5  
*How to Get a Diamond* → Proj. H, 3.3.2, 3.5



**I**  
institution → 3.6, Proj. I  
interdependence →  
    collaboration → 2.2.1, 2.2.2  
    community → 1.1.2  
internet → 3.5  
interview →  
    Int. 1: Mary Welcome  
    Int. 2: Keetra Dean Dixon & Kelsey Elder  
    Int. 3: Jayme Yen & Tom Eykemans  
    Int. 4: Mj Balvanera

**L**  
limitations →  
    in design → Int. 3  
    of perspective → 4.1  
luck → Proj. B

**M**  
memory → 2.2.3  
*Meticulous Drawing Tools* → Proj. K, 3.3.2  
miscommunication → 2.2.2  
mutual aid → 1.1.2, Int. 1

**N**  
neighbors → 1.1.2, Int. 1  
network → 1.1.2, Proj. H, Int. 3, Int. 4

**P**  
pandemic → 1.1.1, 1.1.2, Int. 1, Int. 4  
participation → 2.5, 2.6.1, Int. 2  
*Peer, Peer, Peer, and Peer* → Proj. M, 2.3, 3.5  
peer-to-peer → Proj. G, Proj. M  
persona → Proj. H  
potluck → 2.5, 2.6.3, 3.4, Int. 1  
project →  
    Proj. A: *Video Chat Compositions*  
    Proj. B: *As Luck Would Have It*  
    Proj. C: *Stairwell Games*

Proj. D: *Providence River Scavenger Hunt*  
Proj. E: *Propaganda Game*  
Proj. F: *Community Reader*  
Proj. G: *Commonplace*  
Proj. H: *How to Get a Diamond*  
Proj. I: *Furies*  
Proj. J: *GardenWorld*  
Proj. K: *Meticulous Drawing Tools*  
Proj. L: *A Book That Grows*  
Proj. M: *Peer, Peer, Peer, and Peer*  
Proj. N: *Design School Briefs*  
*Propaganda Game* → Proj. E  
*Providence River Scavenger Hunt* → Proj. D  
publishing → 3.4, Proj. L, Int. 3, Int. 4

**R**  
reading → Proj. F, Proj. G, Proj. L  
reciprocity → 2.5, 2.6.3, Int. 1  
redistribution → 1.1.2, 3.6, Proj. N, Int. 4  
relational →  
    art → 2.4  
    design → 2.4  
    matrix → 2.3  
ritual → Proj. D, Proj. L, Int. 2

**S**  
safety → Proj. F  
script → Proj. A, Proj. B, Proj. N  
self-expression → Int. 3, Int. 4  
social dynamics → 2.3, Int. 1, Int. 2  
space → Proj. C, Proj. E, Int. 2  
    in public → 3.3.1

spatial intervention → Proj. C, Proj. D, Proj. E  
specificity → 3.2.4  
*Stairwell Games* → Proj. C, 2.6.1, 3.3.2  
*Submersion Reader* → Proj. L  
surveillance → 3.5, Int. 4

**T**  
teaching → Int. 2  
tool → Proj. B, Proj. K  
transformation → Proj. L, Int. 1, Int. 2

**U**  
unexpected outcome → 2.2.2, Int. 2  
universality → 3.2.1

**V**  
value → Int. 1, Int. 4  
*Video Chat Compositions* → Proj. A, 2.6.1  
visual norms → 3.2.3

**W**  
website → Proj. H, Proj. I, Proj. K  
worldbuilding → Int. 3

**Z**  
zine → 3.4, Int. 3