

Re-performing Design: Using dramaturgy to uncover graphic designers' perceptions of stakeholders

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Abstract

Graphic design, as a specific research discipline, has been largely underrepresented in academia, with the literature suggesting this is partially due to difficulties in researching its professional practitioners. Acknowledging such hurdles, this article discusses an experimental study that used dramaturgy as a defamiliarising method for uncovering professional graphic designers' perceptions of stakeholders. The study collected graphic designer narratives from online forums as well as dramaturgically informed interviews with professional practitioners. The graphic designers' narratives were converted into a script and used to motivate a troupe of trained actors, who re-performed the narratives during a series of performance workshops. The article argues that this use of trained actors as 'proxy designers' created a refractive form of defamiliarisation, allowing previously obfuscated narratives about graphic designers' perceptions of stakeholders to emerge. Presenting the study as a prototype to inform future research into graphic design and other elusive creative practices, the article also cautions that the amount of defamiliarisation used must be evaluated against the desired outcomes.

Keywords: Graphic Design; Dramaturgy; Performance; Defamiliarisation; Ethnodrama; Design Research

Introduction

In the design studio of a creative agency at which I once worked, the lead designer, Mike (not his real name), was notoriously reticent about discussing his work. Questions about his working process, where his ideas came from or indeed anything relating to his professional practice were generally dismissed with an indecipherable mutter or sneer. The rare exception was when he formally presented designs to stakeholders or clients. During these presentations he became animated and eloquent. Design concepts were flamboyantly presented and responses to questions elaborated upon creatively. It was a performative exposition that would temporarily earn him the nickname 'The Professor'.

Mike's transformation is used here to symbolise a performative aspect of the graphic design profession that this article explores and that, alongside the literature, informs my use of dramaturgy as a research method. Following Goffman (1973), Mangham (2005) and others that have viewed everyday organisational interaction through a performative lens (Boje et al., 2003), my dramaturgical framing of graphic design opens up a productive metaphorical perspective (Oswick et al., 2001; Cornelissen, 2004) for researching the resistant professional practitioners of the under-researched discipline of graphic design.

The profession of graphic design has been described as uniquely problematic to research due to its haphazard history (Frascara, 1988; Julier & Narotzky, 1998), ill-defined pedagogy (Laurel, 2003; Poynor, 2011a: b; Heller, 2015; Dorland, 2016; Jacobs, 2017) and lacking research discourse (Laurel, 2003; Corazzo et al., 2019). Moreover, graphic design is an inherently interdisciplinary and evolving discourse (Davis, 2012; Harland, 2015) with a complex evolution reflected in its professional (Dziobczenski & Person, 2017) and educative (Littlejohn, 2017) formats. Expressing the challenges of investigating the profession, some have highlighted graphic designs' reliance on intangible elements such as intuition (Bennett, 2006; Taffe, 2017). Indeed, Heller refers to it as 'somewhere between science and superstition (or fact and anecdote)', with its dissemination requiring a 'variety of tools and sources' (2019: par. 3). This interdisciplinarity can render the practice fractured (Ambrose et al., 2020) and difficult to examine.

Graphic design's interdisciplinarity has caused it to become an increasingly imprecise professional practice. Originally located within printed mediums (Meggs & Purvis, 2012), graphic design now inhabits web design, interactive design, social media and emerging virtual and augmented reality paradigms (Hastreiter, 2017). This results in 'graphic design' being an imperfect and often misunderstood term (van der Waarde, 2020) within professional practice. Within academia, Frascara (2004) prefers

‘communication design’, as do many university departments, with some using both terms (RMIT, 2020). The two terms are often used interchangeably (Barnard, 2005), while at other times they are amalgamated within multiple aligned categories (Corazzo et al. 2019). ‘Graphic design’ is used in this article because it remains the dominant industry term and enables consistency.

Pedagogically, graphic design is often treated as a supplementary topic or a predominantly aesthetic practice (Heller, 2015; Jacobs, 2017; Walker, 2017), subsumed within the wider visual arts (Poynor, 2011a: b; Triggs, 2011). As a result, graphic design’s professional practice ambiguity (Kotamraju, 2002; Baer, 2010) and, critically, the apparent reticence and overt resistance to research of its practitioners (Banks et al., 2002; Brumberger, 2007; Dorland, 2017) present methodological challenges for this nascent academic discourse, which is still largely embedded in industry (Cabianca, 2016; Davis, 2016). As alluded to in the opening vignette, graphic designers have been described as overtly obstructive (Banks et al., 2002; Roberts et al., 2015) and even flippant and sarcastic towards research. As Dorland explains, directly asking graphic designers to describe what they do is unlikely to be productive, with their responses ‘accompanied almost always with an eye roll’ (2017: 232).

Adding to these difficulties, Phillips (2015) argues that although experts at communicating on behalf of others, graphic designers are remarkably inept at doing so on their own behalf. This paradoxical lack of self-reflectivity suggests graphic designers are especially resistant to what Erickson describes as ‘what is happening?’ questions (1985: 121), resulting in a lack of engagement with contradictions or obfuscated subtexts inherent in graphic designers’ own practice. Graphic designers therefore tend to portray their practice with professionalised ‘common answers’ (Dorland, 2017), rendering research into the underlying motivations of these practitioners difficult.

In an attempt to mitigate these obstacles presented by graphic design practitioners, this study prototyped an experimental methodology, combining dramaturgy with the creative practice of defamiliarisation. Narratives were initially drawn from online graphic design discussion forums, before being contrasted for depth and nuance alongside a series of face-to-face interviews with professional graphic designers. The outcomes were combined to create a ‘script’, called a Performative Design Brief, which was used to motivate a troupe of trained actors. During a series of performance workshops, the actors re-enacted these narratives as short performances. The workshops were used as investigative theatrical sites in which I observed the re-performance of the graphic designer narratives indirectly, by ‘proxy’, with the actors functioning as

third party designers. Thus, the workshop format functioned as a defamiliarising prism. Re-performing the designers' narratives within this 'newly strange' (Sadowska & Laffy, 2018) context of dramaturgy allowed reflection on themes and outcomes that might not normatively have emerged.

Although informed by similar dramaturgic methods such as those undertaken by Howard et al. (2002) and Hope (2011), this study contributes two distinct methodological approaches. Firstly, by intentionally removing the subjects/informants of the research (the graphic designers) from the performances, the performance workshops act as a metaphorical prism, rendering the process refractive rather than merely reflective. Secondly, the performance workshops experimented with incrementally extending the amount of defamiliarisation used, allowing a critical evaluation of the methods used and their limits, with reference to Shklovsky's (1917) original use of defamiliarisation as a creative practice, as well as contemporary implementations, such as Dunne and Raby's 'slight strangeness' (2001: 75). In adopting a novel, even speculative (Wilkie et al., 2017) approach, the study is thus positioned as an experimental pedagogical prototype for research into professional practices which, like graphic design, can appear obfuscated or elusive.

This article emerged from a wider, multi-stage study of graphic design practitioners' professional relationships with stakeholders, which uncovered a series of often obfuscated themes embedded within practitioners' perceptions of their professional practice (Meron, 2019). This article deals predominantly with the novel dramaturgic methodology used within the study. Taking advantage of the interdisciplinary intersection of dramaturgy, ethnography and design research, this article informs graphic design and also offers a contribution to creative disciplines and professions, whose practices can appear obfuscated or elusive to study.

Defamiliarisation, Dramaturgy and Design

Defamiliarisation, or *making strange*, emerged as a creative practice methodology within Russian formalism at the beginning of the 20th century (Bell et al., 2005; Forrest, 2007; Lvov, 2015). It has been loosely adopted by a number of creative practices in the visual arts (Gooding, 1991; Samberger, 2004), photography (Watney 1982) and within research methods such as ethnography (Eisner, 2003) and experimental theatre (Meisiek and Barry, 2007; Eriksson, 2011; Radosavljević, 2013). At its most basic level, to defamiliarise something is to simulate the experiencing of it for the first time (Lemon and Reis, 1965). With the rise of research-based design discourse, defamiliarisation has increasingly been used in wider design research and design thinking practices such as human-

computer interaction (**Bell et al., 2005**) and experimental design (**Seago & Dunne, 1999**). This study adopts defamiliarisation as a central practice, and by incrementally increasing the amount of defamiliarisation used in the performance workshops, draws directly from the original creative practice definition of the term by Shklovsky in 1914. Shklovsky described the manifestation of strangeness (literally estrangement) as the result of the use of numerous defamiliarising creative methods or devices (**Lemon & Reis, 1965; Sher, 1990; Berlina, 2015**).

The dramaturgic format takes advantage of the theatrical nature of graphic design practice. As Gillieson and Garneau (**2018**) point out, graphic design is a distinctively communicative design practice, involving visual presentation and communication with an audience. The performative approach also channels metaphorical comparisons of designers with other theatrical roles, such as dramaturges (**Dorst, 2009; Meany & Clark, 2012**). The study is also informed by the established use of dramaturgy in the wider field of design, which uses such techniques as personas and scenarios (**Eriksson et al., 2013**), testing (**Penin & Tonkinwise, 2009**), project communication (**Blomquist & Arvola, 2002**), interactive devices (**Iacucci & Kuutti, 2002**), awareness-raising among designers about the needs of specific user groups (**Newell et al., 2011**) and visualising future societal design needs (**Blythe & Dearden, 2009**).

In addition to drawing on dramaturgy's long tradition within organisational discourse (**Burke, 1945; Goffman, 1973; Oswick et al., 2001; Nissley et al., 2004; Mangham, 2005**), the study is informed by its pedagogical use (**Heathcote, 1984; Edmiston, 2003**). Indeed, the use of dramaturgy outside of formal theatre as both a generative tool and research method has ranged from the interventionist methods of Boal's (**2000**) Forum theatre and the Epic Theatre of Brecht (**1964**), to the educational practices of process drama (**O'Neill, 1995; Schneider & Jackson, 2000**) as experimental research tools (**Edmiston, 2003**), through to performance ethnography (**Mieczkowski, 2001; Saldaña, 2011**).

Luckhurst (**2008**) describes practitioners of documentary theatre as repurposing the original sources of their performances. Similarly, themes from the designer interviews and online sources provided motivation for the performance workshops. As such, this study builds on practices such as Smith's dramatisation of interviews (**2005**) and Hope's performative interviews (**2011**) as tools for critically mirroring original sources (**Denzin 2001; Meisiek & Barry 2007**). Like the reproduction of everyday theatre as metaphoric performances of professional organisations (**Boje et al., 2003**), the study is a research continuum between roles portrayed by actors and those played out in everyday life (**Schechner, 2002; Carlson, 2011**); its value resting not in performative skill, but in the distance created between

the original and the simulacral re-performance (Carlson, 2004). As Madison (2011) suggests, performance communicates subjects' worlds in their own words, exposing aspects of that world that are not otherwise visible in everyday practice.

The Dramaturgic Interview Method

The online forum and interview narratives often confirmed similar broad outlooks among the graphic designers. However, it was soon apparent that the discussions emerging from the online graphic design forums tended towards stereotypical and binary narratives. Thus, a further stage of data gathering, in the form of interviews, was required.

To intervene in the tendency for graphic designers to provide assumed answers (Lawson, 2004; Dorland, 2017), the interview methodology integrated theatrical tropes such as personas and scenarios to function as defamiliarising devices (Shklovsky, 1965; Sher, 1990) and metaphorical probes (Gaver et al., 1999; 2004). For example, one question asked designers to visualise themselves in the army, which engaged with the designers' notions of hierarchy. Their responses are discussed below in Case Study 2. These methods allowed interviewees to discuss their professional practices outside the familiar frames of reference (Dunne and Raby, 2001; Celikoglu et al., 2017) of everyday graphic designer–stakeholder interaction. These dramaturgically informed interviews enabled a degree of nuance to emerge, which allowed stereotypical views of stakeholders and the graphic design process to be unpacked. A lexicon of theatrical tropes, personas and scenarios that emerged from the interviews were then integrated into the Performative Design Brief.

The Performance Workshops

The performance workshops used improvised, theatre director-supervised exercises. These included simple two-person dialogues, physical theatre, word games and fully-fledged scenario-based improvisations. On completion of some exercises, actors were brought together to discuss the performances. What follows is a discussion of two case studies from the performance workshops. They were selected for discussion as they engage with two key narratives that emerged from the online forum discussions and the designer interviews: graphic designers' perceptions of stakeholders as gatekeepers, as well as notions of status and hierarchy, identified as design capital.

Case Study 1: Re-performing metaphor

Negative perceptions of stakeholder communication were common among the graphic designer interviewees and in the online forums. The designers often perceived that stakeholders assumptively adopted a managerial role, something the designers believed to be an unnecessary intermediary or gatekeeping presence that negatively impacted the communication process of graphic design. This concurs with Jacobs' (2017) suggestions that stakeholders often default to a managerial position within the design process and can impact the creativity of graphic designers. This is exacerbated when stakeholders lack industry experience of working with designers (Banks et al., 2002; Holzmann & Golan, 2016). One performance workshop scenario engaged with these issues using a popular theatrical exercise known as 'Telephone'.

The exercise involved the theatre director privately 'briefing' the first actor, in a row of five, with a key phrase. The actors would pass this phrase down the line by whispering it into their neighbour's ear, with the final actor, in this example named Khyal, revealing their interpretation of the inevitably garbled message. The exercise also re-performed the graphic designers' perceptions of facing unrealistic deadlines. For example, the theatre director introduced simulated timescale pressures, such as requiring the actors to repeat the same exercise within increasingly shorter timescales, resulting in increased miscommunication.

Discussing his performance, Khyal noticed that the exercise had created a hierarchical framework, like a line of command in an email chain, for him and his fellow actors. Khyal elaborated that in a 'real-life' situation (in his theatrical role as 'designer'), faced with such a series of conflicting messages, he would have little choice but to query his immediate stakeholder in the communication chain. When asked to reflect upon the impact of this for his workday, Khyal replied that it would have been a waste of a day and that he would have wanted a better design brief from the beginning. This response is reminiscent of comments from an online forum poster (HotButton, 2016), who suggested that graphic designers ought to 'put the burden on them [stakeholders]' to provide a comprehensive design brief. For Khyal, that request would ideally have been aimed at the stakeholder who had initiated the chain of communication, cutting out the 'gatekeeper'.

This opinion was shared by some of the graphic design interviewees. Marcus (2013), a self-employed designer, had described several scenarios in which designers had been at the receiving end of a disorganised briefing process: 'You often have this after a concept or research has already been done. Then, at the end, you suddenly get handed the real text and images.' Similarly, Patricia (2013), who designs books, brochures and logos and

Bruce (2013), a self-employed designer, respectively suggested in their interviews that stakeholders 'don't really understand the process' and 'just try and tell you what you want to hear'. This results in stakeholder frustration at the extended length of the project, a situation that Marcus believed would be avoided by involving designers earlier and ensuring direct access to the client, rather than communicating through a chain of stakeholders. Koslow et al. (2003) suggest this frustration reflects graphic designers being reduced to reactive implementers of a brief, or mere technicians of design (Schön, 1983), with little capital for questioning or influencing the process.

The final misunderstood and distorted message is a predictable outcome of the Telephone exercise. Its importance lies in demonstrating how the graphic designers' perceptions of stakeholder communication were carried through to the performance workshops, in which they were dramatised by a third party (the actors as proxy designers) and defamiliarised. The use of this exercise as a dramaturgic metaphoric device for the designers' perceptions of their organisational process (Cornelissen, 2004) repurposes one frame of reference within an alternate setting, enabling it to be viewed from a newly unfamiliar perspective (Schön, 1993; Sadowska & Laffy, 2018). That defamiliarised dramaturgic context enabled researcher identification and engagement with themes around graphic designers' perceptions of stakeholders, such as the gatekeeping trope, that might otherwise not have emerged or been overtly visible.

Case Study 2: Re-performing perceptions of design capital

Graphic designers' professional capital has increasingly been challenged by the interrelated influences of evolving technology (Helfand, 2002; Drucker & McVarish, 2013), growing ambiguity of designers' roles (Girard and Stark, 2002) and the rise of in-house design departments (Geraedts et al., 2012; Silk & Stiglin, 2016). The resultant graphic designer battles for gravitas (Fishel 2008) and perceptions around the insecurity of their professional value (Lunenfeld 2004; Barnes et al. 2009) are explored in this second case study.

In this scenario, actors were assigned a collective design task of 'rebranding a law enforcement authority'. To minimise the tendency for the actors to draw on external perceptions about graphic design practice, the theatre director briefed each actor using motivations drawn from persona descriptions in the Performative Design Brief, rather than overt job titles. For example, one actor was briefed that 'health and safety' was a part of their role, while another's role included 'time management'. Other persona characteristics included the kinds of clothes that each character might wear, their hobbies and other motivations.

During the scenario, it was noticeable that Katherine, the actor who appeared to have taken on the 'designer' role, increasingly performed a reactive, even subservient role. In contrast, the actors playing stakeholders assumed managerial roles. For example, shortly into the improvisation Katherine sat down and pretended to be quietly working, while the other actors remained standing, discussing high-end strategic issues or dealing with crises. Katherine generally only spoke when spoken to, or when confirming instructions with questions such as 'so, do you just want me to...?'.

During the debriefing session, Katherine confirmed that her role was focused on reactive practical solutions, such as 'listening to the important things ... and trying to do the work'. Conversely, the other actors claimed they had focused on conceptual and organisational issues. This was also evident in the other actors' use of marketing jargon, such as 'looking at current perceptions and changing them' and 'cutting through the chatter and getting at the main crux for pulling the idea together'. As with Case Study 1, the designers' perceived managerialism of stakeholders was carried through to the performances. Additionally, Katherine's depiction of deference is reminiscent of interviewee narratives, in which designers appeared to undermine their own design capital.

For example, to interrogate the topic of design capital, an interview question was posed asking the graphic designers to visualise their position within an army. The question intentionally invoked exaggerated and stereotypical hierarchical dramaturgic metaphors; a conceptual method that has been repurposed within usability and interactive design (**Mattelmäki & Keinonen, 2001; Blythe & Wright, 2006**). While the designers positioned themselves as central to the design process, most also qualified their importance by downgrading their authority. For example, Gary (**2013**), a designer who works with artists and curators, described his army role as being 'Not too high up. On the field – slightly in charge'. Similarly, Bruce (**2013**) positioned himself 'Off to the side. Really important, but no authority'. Most interviewees selected similarly supporting roles in this metaphorical army. Patricia (**2013**) chose 'nurse' and Maureen (**2013**), a senior designer and manager, chose 'cook', with only one interviewee selecting an actual 'military' role. These responses indicate a tacit affirmation from these designers of their limited design capital, a recurring theme that appears to have been replicated by proxy during the performance workshops.

The performances support LaRossa's (**2017**) suggestions that professional insecurity among graphic designers results from the practice's lack of historical and educational focus. Moreover, the case studies support Phillips' (**2015**) assertion that graphic designers lack organisational

assertiveness and confidence in negotiation and bring to mind Fishel's (2002) descriptions of graphic designers' constant battles for organisational legitimacy. The outcomes of this study also prompt wider questions about whether the lack of direction in formal graphic design pedagogy (Poynor, 2011b; Heller, 2015; Dorland, 2016; Jacobs, 2017; Corazzo et al., 2019), alongside the practice's haphazard historical professional development (Frascara, 1988; Julier & Narotzky, 1998), contributes to graphic designers' perceptions of a lack of design capital.

Critique: Limitations and opportunities

The use of trained actors as proxy designers in the performance workshops intentionally removed the designer interviewees as direct informants and subjects of the study, enabling insight into obfuscated aspects of professional design practice. This indirect approach renders the method a refractive one, moving beyond the looking glass of organisational drama (Meisiek & Barry, 2007) and playful design devices, probes and interventions, which are intended primarily as provocative artefacts of inspiration (Loi, 2007; Sanders & Stappers, 2014), to channel the original concept of Shklovsky's (1917) estrangement (Lemon & Reis, 1965; Bell et al., 2005; Forrest, 2007). In doing so, the study generatively used theatre's default tendency to dramatise the subject at hand (McKee, 1997) in order to metaphorically re-perform the graphic designers' perceptions of stakeholders, thus defamiliarising them. Denzin (2001) describes this operation as drama transcending itself to become research by enabling a critique of the portrayed topics.

The performance workshops experimented with degrees of defamiliarisation. For example, in the Telephone exercise, the word 'design' was not even mentioned. At other times, such as Case Study 2, the actors were briefed about stakeholder personas and scenarios, but only using generalised themes and tropes from the designer interviews. In later exercises, more overt motivations such as job titles were provided to the actors. These approaches move beyond Dunne and Raby's 'slight strangeness' (2001: 75), extending from Howard et al.'s (2002) use of real designers for moderation of actors' performances as 'surrogate users' (2002: 178) and Sophie-Hope's use of practitioners as performers (2011).

The choice to exclude the graphic designer interviewees from the performance workshops appears to be validated by the workshop outcomes. Their intervention in the workshops would have diluted the defamiliarisation, potentially deflecting the actors' motivations from those of the Performative Design Brief. Indeed, Howard et al.'s study suggests that the involvement of designers may have impacted performances, with actors in their study indicating awareness and even empathy with the designers, at one stage commenting: 'It's unusual when you are up there

(on stage), and I'm feeling sorry for you guys (the designers) having to watch this, and you're writing things down!' (2002: 178).

However, isolation from the original graphic designer sources of motivation possibly led to confusion for the actors, increasing potential for their digression from the topic. For example, during a debriefing session, Khyal expressed frustration about his seemingly intractable negotiative position when dealing with a specific design issue arising from the Telephone exercise, stating: 'I'm not a designer'. Only acting as a designer, his professional insight was limited by the director's brief. Had there been active involvement of actual graphic designers during the workshops, they could have addressed Khyal's queries or tutored him to produce a more 'realistic' performance. A similar issue was identified during Howard et al.'s (2002) study: because their actors were not asked to accurately portray designers (the normative expectation of an actor), they were also sometimes puzzled about what was expected of them. However, in my study, when overt designer motivations were provided in the brief, the actors noticeably drew more heavily from preconceived notions of graphic design practice, rather than relying on the brief; thus bypassing the intended research method. These observations suggest that the degree of defamiliarisation ought to be monitored when using actors as third-party designers.

Intentionally motivated solely by the perceptions of graphic designers (via the Performative Design Brief), the roles performed by the actors were inevitably subjective. This was seen in Case Study 2, with Katherine's portrayal of the designer as a harassed, yet stoic, and even heroic character. Meanwhile, the stakeholders were portrayed as disorganised, concerned with peripheral issues and out of touch. While this indicates the success of the method in conveying the designers' perceptions of stakeholders into performative narratives and tropes through third-party re-performances, it also affirms the designer-centric approach. Therefore, the study does not claim to validate or judge those perceptions, or the cultural, professional, or organisational environments from which they emerge. Its function is to prototype a new method for observing graphic designers' perceptions of one aspect of those environments.

This article argues for the use of dramaturgically informed defamiliarisation as a critical method for engagement with graphic design professional practice. Dramaturgically informed defamiliarisation can facilitate a critical examination of this practice, many of whose practitioners have been described as appearing to willfully obscure their practice (Cross, 2011), avoid engagement with (Dorland, 2017) and be resistant to research (Roberts et al., 2015) and lack ability to adequately communicate their own professional needs (Phillips, 2015).

The outcomes of this study contribute to a fledgling research discourse devoted specifically to graphic design. This study adds weight to the 'growing pains' (Davis 2016: 130) of building scholarly bridges between professional graphic design practice and academic discourse, by informing the experimental nature of graphic design (Ross, 2018) within an interdisciplinary research framework. Within this experimental and interdisciplinary framework, graphic design is presented as distinct yet versatile enough to respond to the transitory, historical, organisational, professional and academic paradigms within which the practice and its practitioners operate.

Conclusion

Graphic design is at an acute stage in its ongoing evolution, as it faces challenges from automation and the democratisation of design, leading to changing workplace practices. This brings new challenges to graphic designers' relationships with stakeholders and to their levels of design capital within the creative process. Leveraging and adapting methods from other design disciplines, dramaturgy and ethnography this study contributes to a growing understanding of the under-researched professional practice (and informs the nascent academic discipline) of graphic design.

The performative workshops experimented with a refractive method, using dramaturgy to defamiliarise graphic designers' perceptions of stakeholders. Analysing the workshops against graphic designer narratives indicated the method's potential for portraying the design process through the prism of a third-party re-performed environment, thereby intervening in the habitual communication patterns of graphic designers. As discussed within this article, the use of dedicated actors as proxy designers comprised a precarious balance of methodological requirements. Thus, the study demonstrated the need to evaluate the difficult balance of research priorities alongside objectives, when adapting its dramaturgic method for future studies. In summary, the study is presented as a pedagogical prototype to inform research into graphic design and other disciplines with everyday practices that appear obfuscated or elusive to research.

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