

## Visual Communications 3

# Advanced Practice



Open College of the Arts  
Michael Young Arts Centre  
Redbrook Business Park  
Wilthorpe Road  
Barnsley S75 1JN

0800 731 2116  
[enquiries@oca.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@oca.ac.uk)  
[weareoca.com](http://weareoca.com)  
[oca.ac.uk](http://oca.ac.uk)

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Course written by Christian Lloyd.

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# Introduction

Welcome to the *Advanced Practice* course, the first element of your Level 3 studies for Visual Communications.

Building on the learning you've undertaken at previous levels, *Advanced Practice* provides you with a framework to develop specialist knowledge and understanding of your practice, be it within illustration, graphic design or visual communication. The course will support you to:

- develop a deeper understanding of your creative practice and where it sits alongside wider creative contexts
- explore an increasingly personal voice within your work
- demonstrate growing autonomy as a learner.

The course aims to develop your design skills, research methods and ability to generate creative ideas and help you improve the visual quality and presentation of your work as a whole. To achieve these aims you'll establish self-directed projects, critically evaluate your work, research and reflect on contemporary contexts, and consider how you can best present your practice.

Developing an increasingly personal voice in your creative ideas and visual outcomes is one of the aims of the course. A personal voice could be described as a signature visual style but it is actually much more than this. Style describes the tone of your voice but says nothing about what you're saying or to whom you're talking. Having a voice in your work should touch upon the way in which you work, the content you choose, and the contexts in which you place it, as much as the way it looks. Having a visual style can be very important in defining who you are, but to develop a successful style you need to address the deeper issue of having a voice. Developing self-directed projects will help you establish this voice by finding the kinds of content, contexts and opportunities that can move you forward.

Consult your Level 3 Visual Communications Handbook to find out more about how this course connects to the other two Level 3 courses, the expectations of this level of study, the support available to you through OCA and your tutor, thoughts on getting your work out into the world, and how best to prepare for assessment. It's a good idea to read through your Handbook before you start Part One of this course.

## Course aims and outcomes

The aims of this course are for you to:

- establish greater levels of autonomy by undertaking self-directed projects that explore an increasingly personal voice in relationship to project themes
- identify gaps in your knowledge and understanding or areas for development and respond to them by extending your design, visual and/or technical skills
- synthesise research, interpretive skills and creative problem-solving to develop, test and visualise your ideas effectively in response to project work
- exercise self-reflection and communication skills in order to identify and present your personal voice in relation to a detailed and specialist understanding of contemporary practice and its contexts.

On successful completion of this course you will be able to:

- establish self-directed projects that extend and synthesise your research, visual, creative and technical abilities
- develop, test and assimilate visual research and ideas in response to project work
- present your practice, ideas and research effectively in response to project work
- communicate a detailed, specialist and reflective understanding of your creative practice in relation to wider contemporary contexts and practices.

## Your course at a glance

### Case studies

A series of OCA tutors have responded to the same questions you will be asked to reflect on throughout the course. Refer back to these as you progress through the course.

### Part one: Understanding your practice

This first part of the course sets up an investigation into contemporary and professional practices within the fields of illustration, graphic design and/or visual communication. Using this research as a starting point, Assignment One asks you to undertake a critical reflection of your own practice in order to identify areas of interest and/or specialism, gaps in your knowledge and understanding, or areas for development, in the form of a personal statement. Assignment Two responds to this personal statement by asking you to undertake a self-directed project.

### Part two: Text and image

In this part of the course, you'll explore the use of text and image to communicate ideas in a number of contexts and creatively combine image-making, layout and typography through a self-directed project in Assignment Three. You'll examine the relationship you have with content by exploring how you respond to a text, author your own content and develop visual narratives in your work.

### Part three: Working with an audience

Part Three is a critical examination of how to approach designing for an audience through creative problem-solving, conducting research, developing and testing ideas, undertaking audience-focused project work and reflecting on the results. Assignment Four gives you a range of options to achieve this.

### Part four: Presenting your practice

This final part of the course explores a range of ways for presenting your practice through the use of portfolios, exhibitions or other promotional material. Part Four also asks you to reflect on ways in which you can conceive and describe your practice and also ways of extending your personal creative voice through self-directed project work. Assignment Five asks you to put this into practice by presenting your work to a high visual standard.

## Assessment criteria

The assessment criteria for *Advanced Practice* are listed below. If you're going to have your work assessed to gain formal credits, make sure you take note of these criteria and consider how each of the assignments you complete demonstrates evidence of them. On completion of each assignment, and before you send your assignment to your tutor, test yourself against the criteria; in other words, do a self-assessment, and see how you think you would do. To help you with this, the Visual Communications Assessment Criteria for Level 3 describe how each of the criteria relates to a grade. For example, outstanding levels of creativity would be seen as 'exceptional synthesis of analytical thinking and creativity, integrating highly significant independent judgements and very clearly evidencing a defined personal creative voice', while at a satisfactory level it would show 'reasonable synthesis of analytical thinking and creativity, integrating some significant independent judgements and partial evidence of a defined personal creative voice'. Look at the table in Section 4 of the Level 3 Visual Communications Handbook for further information.

Note down your findings for each assignment you've completed in your learning log, noting all your perceived strengths and weaknesses, taking into account the criteria every step of the way. This will be helpful for your tutor to see, as well as helping you prepare for assessment.

- **Creativity (30%):** Employ creativity in the process of observation, interpretation, problem analysis, proposing, visualising and/or making; articulate independent judgements and a personal creative voice.
- **Research and idea development (20%):** Source, analyse and assimilate research material and develop, test, and evaluate ideas in order to generate ideas and solutions.
- **Visual and technical skills (30%):** Use visual skills in visualising, making and presenting, and materials, techniques and technologies to communicate ideas and information.
- **Context (20%):** Exercise awareness of appropriate historical, critical, professional and/or emerging contexts and debates; be informed by underlying concepts, principles and working practices; and use critical and reflective skills to support a self-directed and sustained personal and/or professional position.

## Assessment requirements

When it comes to formal or summative assessment, these are the items tutors will expect to see for this course. For more details on how you go about developing them, please consult your Level 3 Visual Communications Handbook.

- A portfolio documenting your body of work and supporting sketchbooks and development work (80%).
- A learning log containing supporting visual/written research, reflections, analysis and other material (20%).

## Advanced Practice reading list

### Essential texts (available as an OCA student resource)

- Julier, G. (2014) *The Culture of Design* (3rd edition), London: Sage Publishing, Chapter 3: Designers and design discourse, pp.47–68
- Margolin, V. 'The citizen designer' in Bierut, M., Drenttel, W. & Heller, S. (eds.) (2007) *Looking Closer Bk. 5: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*, New York: Allworth Press, p.118
- Morley, S. (2015) *Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art*, Oakland, CA: University of California Press, Chapter 7: Futura, Constructivist words, p.71–80
- Noble, I. & Bestley, R. (2011) *Visual Research: An Introduction to Research Methodologies in Graphic Design* (2nd edition), London: Bloomsbury, Chapter 4: Audience and message, pp.114–39
- Poynor, R. (2007) *Obey the Giant: Life in the Image World*, Basel: Birkhäuser, 'First things next', pp.141–50

### Recommended texts

- Allanwood, G. & Beare, P. (2014) *User Experience Design: Creating Designs Users Really Love*. London: Bloomsbury
- Heller, S. & Vienne, V. (2009) *Art Direction Explained, At Last!* London: Laurence King
- Noble, I. & Bestley, R. (2011) *Visual Research: An Introduction to Research Methodologies in Graphic Design* (2nd edition). London: Bloomsbury
- Poynor, R. (2013) *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism* (mini edition). London: Laurence King

### Recommended journals

- Creative Review*: [www.creativereview.co.uk/](http://www.creativereview.co.uk/)
- The Design Journal*: [www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfdj20#.VdWuJX1je68](http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfdj20#.VdWuJX1je68)
- Eye*: [www.eyemagazine.com/](http://www.eyemagazine.com/)
- Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture*: [www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-Journal,id=165/](http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-Journal,id=165/)
- Journal of Communication Design*: [www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfcd20#.VdWvwX1je68](http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfcd20#.VdWvwX1je68)
- Journal of Illustration*: [www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-Journal,id=233/](http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-Journal,id=233/)
- Ubiquity*: [www.ubiquityjournal.net/](http://www.ubiquityjournal.net/)
- Varoom*: [www.varoom-mag.com/](http://www.varoom-mag.com/)
- Visual Communication*: <http://vcj.sagepub.com/>

### Recommended websites

Adbusters: [www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org)

Association of Illustrators: [www.theaoi.com](http://www.theaoi.com)

Brain Pickings: [www.brainpickings.org](http://www.brainpickings.org)

Bridgeman Education: [www.bridgemaneducation.com/](http://www.bridgemaneducation.com/) \*

The Design Council: [www.designcouncil.org.uk](http://www.designcouncil.org.uk)

Design Observer: <http://designobserver.com>

International Society of Typographic Designers: [www.istd.org.uk](http://www.istd.org.uk)

Olga's Gallery: [www.abcgallery.com/](http://www.abcgallery.com/) \*

Oxford Art Online: [www.oxfordartonline.com](http://www.oxfordartonline.com) \*

Process.arts: <http://process.arts.ac.uk/> \*

VADS visual arts resource: <http://vads.ac.uk> \*

Visual Methodologies: [www.sagepub.com/rose/default.htm](http://www.sagepub.com/rose/default.htm)

\* Log on access via OCA student site: [www.oca-student.com/resource-type/online-library](http://www.oca-student.com/resource-type/online-library)

Finally...

Enjoy the course

## Case studies

Throughout the course you'll be asked to reflect on questions that will help you to frame and understand your practice, creative process and personal voice. We considered it only fair that we should ask existing Visual Communications tutors the same questions. Tutors reflected on their creative and professional practices, providing personal responses to the following prompts:

- how they describe their practice
- the location of their practice – within a particular discipline or across disciplines
- their personal creative voice
- their working process – how they generate ideas and visual outcomes
- how they decide what makes a piece of work successful
- how they learn
- what kinds of challenges they respond to
- what kinds of feedback they find useful
- what kinds of projects they are interested in developing
- longer term aims
- gaps in their knowledge
- authorship within their work
- relationships between text, image and narrative in their work
- the relationship their work has to an audience
- how they get feedback from an audience.

Read through the case studies before you start Part One and return to them as you work through the course. The tutor responses provide an insight into specific ways of working and different practices. More importantly, they provide an insight into individual creative processes and the ways these continue to develop through learning, feedback and reflection. Use them as a reflective tool to think about how you discuss your own strategies and approaches.

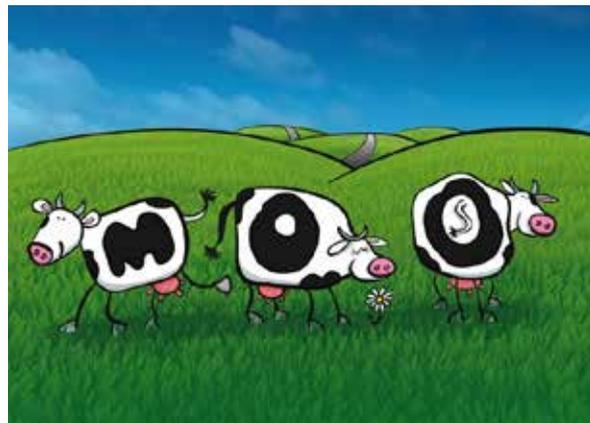
## Judy Brown

I'm currently working as a freelance illustrator, primarily in children's publishing (including educational publishing), and as an author/illustrator of children's humorous novels. I've been a freelance illustrator since 1985, working across multiple disciplines including publishing, editorial, corporate work, design, CD covers, pretty much anything I've been asked to do. Working as a freelance means you have to be flexible and adaptable.

I've seen enormous changes over my career. When I first left art college, nobody worked digitally; there were simply no software programs that could do what today's programs do. I worked in line and watercolour wash mostly. Over the years this has changed to the point where I am always expected to provide my work digitally, whether or not it has been created that way.

I suppose my personal creative voice comes through best when I'm working on my own stories and illustrating them. It's the one time I have pretty much full creative control.

I actually work in a few different styles – sometimes a blessing, sometimes a curse – so the job will dictate my approach. I read the brief, collect reference material, do the roughs to the required size, scan in, save with the appropriate filename and send to the client.



Judy Brown

If I'm doing personal work, I tend to use my sketchbook to draw random things from my imagination, sometimes in line, sometimes colour. Then a particular drawing or character will spark an idea that I'll develop. Sometimes it's the words that spark off an idea and I'll draw the character afterwards in my sketchbook to 'get to know who they are' before I start to write. A successful piece is when I've managed to encapsulate on paper the idea I had in my head at the beginning. It feels like watching a film sometimes and trying to translate it to the page.

After college, without doubt my key learning moment was when I realised I needed to be able to work digitally. Watercolour never really works digitally so I had to reinvent myself as an illustrator to be able to provide my work in the way the market was demanding. At the time everybody wanted their artwork provided in Photoshop, so that's what I had to learn. There is more flexibility now but it's still true that publishers prefer digital files as professional scanning adds to their costs. Unless you're creating your own picture books (what most of us would like to do, but very competitive in a very small market), working as an illustrator is driven by providing your client with what they need.

I think illustrators are always learning – I know I am. I still try new mediums, revisit old ones, try new software techniques, combine digital and traditional methods. There's always something new to learn. Many illustrators will tell you that it's not a choice, it's just who you are. Even when we're not working on a commission, we're doing personal work. I can't imagine ever stopping creating images.

At the moment I'm working on some new series, which my literary agent is trying to place with publishers. One is a series of picture books; the others are children's novels with illustration. Long term I'd like to be able to concentrate on my own work all of the time, or at least take fewer commissions – the ones I want to do! Gaps in my knowledge would mainly be software-based and I'm always trying new techniques. It can be hard to keep up with developments. Most of my work is in publishing so I always have to bear text in mind. Layouts have to fit around text, describe text or work with the text. With my own novels I'll often incorporate text within a drawing. With these novels it's great to have the opportunity to put the text exactly where I want to and illustrate around it.

The best feedback is when I get a response from the children that read my books. I've done some author visits with live feedback which can be quite harrowing for an illustrator who spends a lot of time alone in a room working! Best of all is when I get emails or letters from children or their parents just to say how much they've enjoyed my books or that they've started getting into reading just because of my stories and pictures. That's what makes everything worthwhile!

[www.judybrown.co.uk](http://www.judybrown.co.uk)



Judy Brown, *Chameleon Cat*

## Beth Dawson

My current practice is heavily multi-disciplinary. I run my own business as a freelance artist and designer, I'm a comic artist, a silver jeweller (I make 'narrative jewellery') and exhibit sculptural object work for exhibition. I'm also a lecturer in graphics and illustration at the OCA and Leeds Beckett University.

Despite the range of media I use and the skills I have being so varied, the themes I work through across disciplines are very similar. Most of my work includes elements of nostalgia and sentimentality and investigates very intimate and personal ideas as a universal shared experience. I have a particular interest in the object as a narrative device. Childhood toys, talismans and fantastical ideas all feature in the work I make, whether it's drawn, designed, crafted or textual.

Usually my work starts very vaguely with a story. If I'm working with a client I'll discuss their own stories with them. If it's a sentimental piece of jewellery that's being commissioned for someone they're close to, we'll discuss the client and recipient's shared interests and memories together and pin down some key themes or ideas for a piece. If I'm making some branding work for a business, I'll do a similar thing where I'll talk about the story of the client's business and help them locate a personal value for the service they offer. For instance, I was recently commissioned by a photographer who wanted a new logo for his business. He wanted to avoid the general imagery associated with wedding photography: the camera, the flash, the aperture. He found all these images too generic and they didn't describe his own personality. He is quite a gregarious character and wanted this to be embedded into his logo. The client often found himself drawn to the colourful and personal objects or paraphernalia that guests at a wedding bring along to the event. In the end we settled on an Indian parasol/umbrella for his logo as this incorporated both his own personal history and his quirky personality. The idea of an umbrella being 'bad luck' or considered falsely as a 'bad omen' for a wedding day was a playful idea we were both drawn to. Most brides will 'hope it doesn't rain' on the day but the umbrella itself is the object that saves the day (and the dress!) from ruin. The umbrella provides solace or shelter to keep everyone looking their best, so using this object as a visual device to describe celebration and overcoming adversity whatever the weather seemed to align well with how a photographer is employed to capture and make everything look its best on the day. The client loved it and so do his customers!



Beth Dawson, umbrella logo

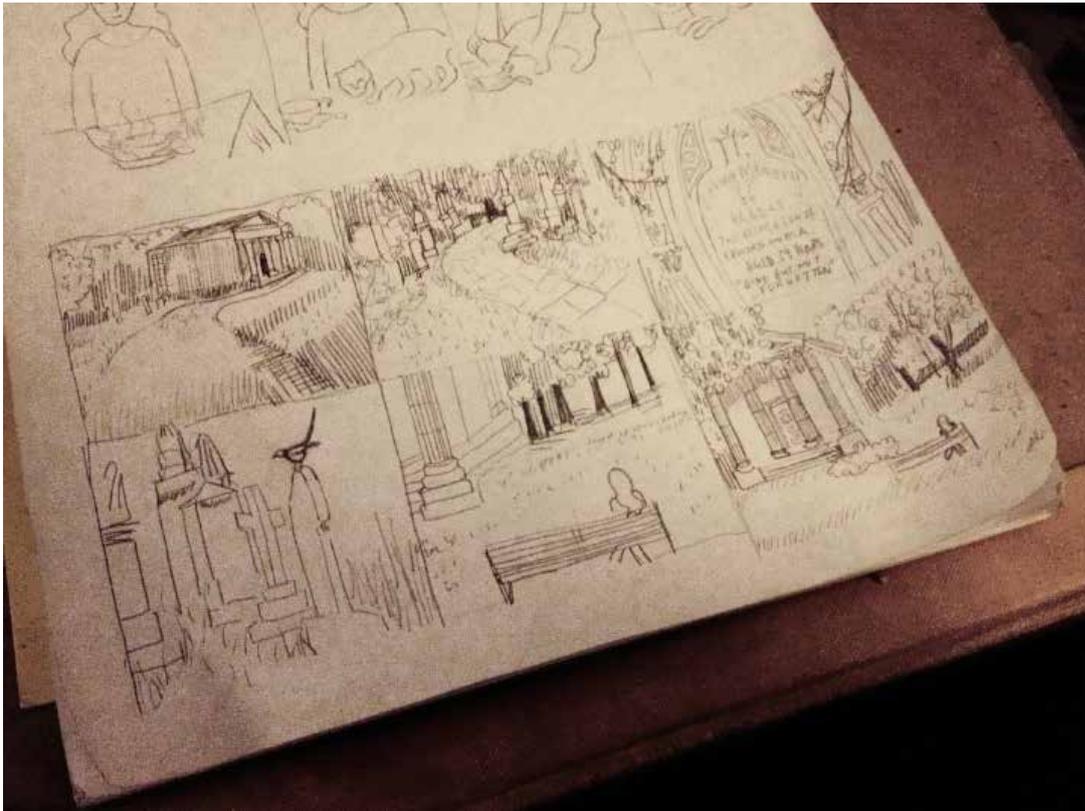
For my comic illustrations I also begin with stories and usually start every project with a written outline. The comic process is quite lengthy and much longer and more considered than my other work (which is why I enjoy it so much because it is very challenging). I start out with just words, a simple story or poem, and then I highlight bits of text that I think are the best to turn into key panels. I make notes about certain scenes and locations I want to include and will often make visits to places for reference material. I then thumbnail the key panels I can imagine most clearly. Because my drawings are not just literal interpretations of the words I've written, but instead are there to complement or add a dual narrative, I don't draw everything in chronological order as sometimes it takes me a while to think up how I want the message from the words to differ from the pictures. Instead, I draw the images I see most clearly first and then slowly piece together the in-between images when I'm happy with the key frames. I then draft and redraft these drawings until I'm content with the basic outlines and I've figured out my panels. The sketching part feels a little like archaeology. Often I have a very vague idea of a scene and with each draft it's like unearthing more details until the image makes sense. I then blue up my lines or ink them straight up and finish my work digitally where I can rearrange parts or re-size images to fit the narrative. Then I will add in my text and do some more re-jigging to ensure everything flows properly, with the colouring and testing of different colour palettes being the last part.



Beth Dawson

Deciding what's successful and unsuccessful in my work is tough because I can get very attached to the work I do and if I'm working with a client there are often compromises that have to be made. For all work, but especially client work, it's important to start with lots of ideas. It's very hard to decide if an idea is any good if you only have one because you have nothing to compare it to. I might come up with five ideas and share my favourite three with a client, keeping two in reserve in case they don't like the ones I bring to them. I prefer to come up with even more than five ideas (including very far-fetched ones or solutions that I initially hate) because I don't like feeling stumped if I've shared the first few ideas and they still don't like what I've suggested. I think it's important to remember, whether you're making work for yourself or for a client, that the most rewarding outcomes are the ones that surprise you. You have to challenge yourself; if you don't do this then the work can feel repetitive and unfulfilling. Finding ways of testing and questioning whether the work is stretching me along the way is essential. Usually I know I'm doing this when I'm feeling frustrated because it feels hard!

For the personal work I make, I have a small group of friends, colleagues and people in industry I share my work with at various stages – from initial ideas to rough drafts and final tests. I get the most from sharing my work at the point where I've initially fleshed out my ideas but before I've put too much time into it; this is a great time to include other people because you still have room to alter the work in the light of feedback. The other time when I share my work more broadly is when I've got my first rough final draft finished. Again, it's crucial to get feedback here, because if you leave it too late to show your work to people then you can't implement their feedback and it's frustrating for both of you. The group I share my work with I trust to be honest, and because I've learnt to be objective over time, I mostly love the feedback I get. Usually the feedback I get is just a case of them pointing out things I've already considered or forgotten about, or something that I've had a niggling feeling isn't right but can't quite articulate why. Sometimes they will come back to me with things I haven't noticed and often I will agree with them and alter my work before the final draft. Sometimes it's frustrating because they will give me feedback that means they don't get something or haven't picked up on something I was trying to do and there's always a tendency to feel like you want to explain this to them. The best way to work, though, is to quietly accept the feedback and be grateful and then decide what you think you need to change so that your work comes over to your audience in the way you'd hoped it would.



Beth Dawson, *After Life* (sketch)

I learn best through 'doing'. The silversmithing work I do is completely self-taught and I have had no formal training. I bought my silversmithing tools on a bit of a whim after spending years thinking that I might enjoy making jewellery and I didn't go to any lessons or thoroughly read any books before I started trying to make things. This made it a very slow and clumsy process. For the first year of making things, I was spending too much on supplies and not enough time on figuring out the basics. It took me months to even properly figure out soldering two pieces of metal together. I think this is a bad and good way of learning: it makes learning an organic process; you have to be very observant about what's happening during the physical process of constructing something; and it feels like quite a voyage of discovery. However, these days there are so many YouTube videos and free online resources to help people figure out straightforward crafting problems that you can speed this process up and learn much more theory along the way. Nowadays, as a result of going through very long-winded processes to figure things out, I have a good level of confidence when it comes to making things and fixing things. I appreciate trial and error but I also very much value a 'just look it up' or 'just ask someone' approach once I've had a few tries myself and failed. I do still love the process of figuring things out for myself - this is embedded a lot in my artwork. When I studied for my MA my project was called 'Toys for the Inquisitive Child' and was all about trying to get adults to nurture a sense of curiosity about the world around them - to shun rules and to start figuring out and exploring and questioning for themselves. I think this idea is intrinsic to the work I do, that it's exploratory and about learning to uncover something through questioning simple things along the way. This is also how I like to teach people through my lecturing.

I love receiving feedback as I've already mentioned. I find it all useful. Even if I don't agree with someone about my work, it's good to get a sense of how other people read the work you make.

I think it's important to understand that feedback is usually based on opinion. Creativity is a very subjective thing and people will feed back to you with their own specific tastes in mind. Sometimes I have a similar taste to them and sometimes it differs and it's about understanding your audience, who you want to please and who your work is for. Getting supportive feedback from your friends to spur you on is good, but getting useful feedback from the audience that you're wanting to get your work appreciated by is the important feedback you need for gaining success.

As far as personal work goes, I am currently working on a series of short comics that will combine together to make one whole book. It's really fun and difficult and ambitious, but because it's broken into smaller parts it feels manageable alongside my other obligations. The intention is to get the book published and I'm currently looking into working with various publishers for this. Over the next year or so I will try and pitch my idea to different places. Because the comics are stand-alone I can keep sending them out to people as and when I make a new one, so I'm not just working on one massive book that I will only get a single opportunity to pitch to publishers with. I'm also going to send the separate comics out to different open calls and competitions. These are useful because they give me some deadlines to make the individual comics for and if I get my work printed through an open call or published via a competition then it helps to give me more acclaim. It feels like a positive approach because with each separate comic the full story develops and takes on a new form. I'm learning a lot through each one, but I'm also embedding opportunities along the way and am able to try out different approaches and styles so my illustration portfolio is broadening.

Once I've established an economical way of illustrating that I think could stand me in good stead for a longer haul, I'd love to develop a full graphic novel. I've been working on a story with my sister for a little while now which might be the starting point for this. I'm also keen to explore the mediums I like to work across more academically through a PhD. I thoroughly enjoyed my MA work and would like to extend this into some heavier research. My interest for this would be finding the perfect medium to tell a story through which would combine my object work with the comic book work and possibly some larger installations to create thoroughly immersive narratives.



Beth Dawson

Sometimes it feels like there are infinite gaps in my knowledge! But in the short term my focus is on:

- Understanding my market. In order to get published it's important to understand my own work and where it fits in with my contemporaries so this means I need to go out and look at the work of others and attend events like *Thought Bubble*. I also need to spend more time reading the graphic story collection at the library and finding good resources online to increase this knowledge.
- Continuing to develop my drawing abilities. I've got some reasonable drawing skills but I could definitely improve and I also would like to learn to draw more quickly and describe things more economically. I'll probably do this through setting myself shorter drawing projects, life drawing and establishing the mediums I like to draw through best.
- Continuing to develop my creative writing/storytelling through reading and writing more, sharing my writing, attending creative writing sessions and developing ways of planning stories from both written and drawn beginnings.
- Getting a more thorough understanding of how to get work published. This is an ongoing learning curve I've found, even for published authors with successful books. The publishing industry is very business-focused and so the more you know about this side of things the more you increase your chances. Things like already having an audience for your work is part of a publisher's decision-making, so if you've got 15,000 followers on Twitter you're more likely to get the go-ahead than someone who would need to build an audience from scratch. The publishers also all have different methods for reviewing work, including different formats for submitting work, and some won't even have an open submission policy at all so you have to find other methods of showing them your work (for example at trade shows and industry events). There's plenty to learn and plenty of gaps in my knowledge here, so I'll be spending a fair amount of time finding out about this over the next few months through online research, discussions with published artists, workshops and attending specific seminars on the subject.

I author a lot of the content within my work, not just with my comic work but through my silver work as well as my object-based work for exhibition. The majority of the work I do is conceived through, at the very least, a loose narrative. For each piece of commissioned jewellery I used to make I would write a blog describing the back story in terms that would explain its relation to the recipient but also describe where the piece might fit in my overall collection of work and artistic explorations. I think some people may consider that illustration or design is a bit of a 'service industry' job where you don't necessarily get the same opportunity to produce authorial work as you might if you were the writer of a book or a fine artist, but I don't know how much this is true for freelance work. If you look at the relationship between someone like Roald Dahl and Quentin Blake then I think you start to understand how both the artists collaborated to make the stories rich and really come to life and how it's hard to imagine that one did not inform the other: that Roald Dahl did not imagine in the process how some of those characters would evolve through Blake's pen and write them accordingly. When a client comes to me to request a piece of work, they do this through a process of discovering what I do and aligning their own requirements with my ability to fulfil this for them. They've already got a sense of the individuality and the voice that my work might bring to the piece they want. I'm not just a fabricator of the work but part of a rich collaboration that, in most cases, incorporates the client's story and outcome into my body of work. I think this is a really interesting area of discussion because whenever anyone collaborates with me it forms a kind of entanglement

that is very rewarding for someone who doesn't have the skills themselves to complete a piece of work. The piece is made through my eyes, but very much belongs to them, their history and their relationship either to the recipient of a gift or their own company or event. It's their story existing in my 'illustrator's world'.

What makes this really interesting is when someone else then comes along and asks me to make the same work for them. Because I don't consider that I'm the full author of the work I very rarely repeat the work for someone else and usually I stipulate that it can be similar but not exactly the same. I suppose this means I consider myself the joint author of many of the pieces of work I make for other people and the sole author of those I make for myself. But even then, some of the pieces I make for exhibition are inspired by other people's short stories, work or poems. I'm very interested in this kind of metafiction where I'm creating visual images for pre-existing ideas or stories we all collectively relate to or understand. Even with the comics I write, I'm not trying to make very clear narratives where characters are explicit and the storylines are rich in plot. They are much more about trying to write a story that is a visual reflection or understanding of universal experiences where the reader can put themselves in the shoes of the main protagonist.

One of the reasons I love doing comic book work is that it's practically like doing an academic study of the relationship between text and image – it's an excellent example of how the two things can fit together to be read and flow as one. It has so much potential for telling stories, and stories within stories, and is a real strategic delight to try and put together and plan. It's also a really accessible form of literature for people who love stories but aren't as good with words and I like that this offers the opportunity to widen people's participation in reading and with illustration and art. Scott McCloud has written an excellent breakdown of terminologies for various forms of combining words and pictures in his book *Understanding Comics* that I'd recommend thoroughly to anyone interested in sequential drawing. He breaks the words-and-image combinations into seven types: word-specific, picture-specific, duo-specific, intersecting, interdependent, parallel and montage. I think most comic artists like to play with all these forms to keep the viewer interested. But I'd recommend reading his definitions because he explains how interesting and complex comic book narrative can be far better than I can.

My jewellery work has a relatively small audience, usually just the client and the recipient at first, but then it goes up onto my site where it gets a general audience who use my folio as a place to decide whether they want to commission me for their work. When I'm making work to sell in shops I have to consider my audience on a slightly grander scale. You need to do much more research for this because you don't want to be spending time and money on materials to make stock that doesn't sell. You have to have a good idea of where you think your products would be best to stock in order for them to reach the right audience. People often tell me that something could sell really well if I were to adapt it for a specific audience, but I try not to pander too much to this because currently I only have the means of production to hand-make everything myself. If I'm not keen on a product then I wouldn't want to spend my time making it again and again even if it was popular and lucrative... Which is perhaps why I consider myself more of an illustrator who sells some products rather than a product-maker who sometimes illustrates.

The relationship my comics have to an audience is hard to tell, because I haven't put enough of them out there to get a real sense of my audience. The audience I have had feedback from, having put some work up on the *Guardian* online, does seem to be quite varied. I was expecting my work to perhaps appeal most to youngish women because the characters so far have been young women themselves; however it's been men who I've received the most feedback from, perhaps because previously the comics market has been quite male-orientated. *Forbidden Planet* and a few other online magazines reviewed my first comic. It is quite a bizarre experience to have your work reviewed by a critic and this has a very 'final' feeling to it; if you don't agree with them, or they make an incorrect assumption, you want to argue with them but you have no recourse to do so. It's good feedback though because it makes you realise how public your work is and you find yourself having to accept that it's no longer this personal and private piece of work you've been labouring over but is now out there for the public to view, own and value at their whim. I know a few authors who've told me they don't read what critics write because it's not really for the author but for the audience to help form their opinion. In this respect you just have to acknowledge and accept that it's similar to receiving feedback from anywhere else: people have different tastes and agendas and it's good to get a sense of how a broad audience might appreciate your work. The most important thing to try and get right though is to be honest when making your work and then find and target your audience – those who will appreciate the work best and who will help you grow and develop creatively through you responding to them and them responding to you. Once you've found this you will find your work far more inspiring and rewarding.

# After Life



Beth Dawson, *After Life*

## Stephen Monger

I make photographs. When I make other things they too can be understood and located in terms of a photographic practice. I make photographs mainly; I make things that I photograph, I make digital drawings with 3D modelling software that are printed as photographs, I make 3D prints, and I make short films. For me the word 'make' is key as I'm interested in making models, real or virtual, for the act of recording through photography, film or other digital processes.

Having worked in this way for over 15 years I've had many different titles or locations suggested by individuals or galleries for my work. They have included terms like photography, art, sculpture, architecture, new media or multi-disciplinary, but mine is a photography that incubates many things. I think it's important that you know what you do and what you call it. It can also be useful to use different titles at times.

When I started out I made photographs to be shown in galleries. I was fortunate to get several high-profile awards and exhibitions, and I also made every effort to talk about what I did to gallery audiences or as visiting lecturer in universities. This led to securing some regular lecturing work. I now run a postgraduate course in the south west of England and tutor for the OCA. So my practice works less as a commercial entity, but provides a reference point for artistic expression and underpins my academic teaching.

The subject matter of my work concerns itself with our relationship to place and, particularly, the vernacular buildings associated with places. I'm interested in buildings that have evolved over time. They are not always beautiful, but they wear their history on the exterior and have stories to tell if you know how to read them. My photographs are about looking, and to that end I like photographs that stand back and interrogate their subject. I do everything possible to make the photography disappear and the subject come to the forefront. When this comes together in a successful way, it's what I would call my personal creative voice.



Stephen Monger, *Dorville Hotel*

I look for subject matter that is close by. I'm not short of ideas, just short of time, and using my daily journeys to locate sites that are changing or can provide the basis for a series of images is one way to be more productive. Having found something that offers possibilities I would visit regularly, walk round the site, make a few reference snaps and start to tease out what it is that intrigues me, whether this has broader interest for others and how I could best capture this in a photograph. Sites that are being regenerated change quite quickly and so do the opportunities.

One question I ask myself early on is whether to make a documentary photograph or build a model back in the studio. Generally it's access that decides. Can I get to the position to make the right photograph? Sometimes there are distracting elements that I want to remove and a model allows this to take place. Photographing on location is about waiting for moments of no movement, flat weather and finding the best position. Early mornings in spring or autumn are my preferred times.

Building models in the studio starts with mount board. Traditionally it's the card that photographs were displayed with and it's such a great material as you can glue it edge to edge. I make thousands of scalpel journeys past my fingers and use wood glue to assemble things that look like two- or three-sided buildings. I paint them with household paint and use clear sandwich packets for windows. I build and select materials that will achieve particular qualities when put under the studio lighting. I'm making something with an end result in mind. 3D drawing is much like physical making but more precise. You don't really get creative accidents with digital modelling.

I can make plenty of good outcomes, but a successful piece of work has something more for me. I want to be able to hold someone's attention. I want them to look and look closely. Increasingly this is harder to do as people are used to moving images and the speed of information. Being prepared to spend time on a photograph is a challenge. This involves providing areas of intensity and areas of calm. It could be creating subtle qualities of light, areas of uncertainty, visual questions, and trying to make the photograph look distinctively different from what a tourist would make.

I have always learnt through doing, and this is something I have tried to pass on in my teaching. I believe creatives are instinctive problem-solvers and telling someone what to do denies them the opportunity to come up with a better solution and embed their own learning. Teaching for me has been about suggesting ways to proceed, giving permission for people to play, and being amazed at what individuals can produce when the right conditions are created for them.



Stephen Monger, *Dorville Hotel* (work in progress)

I tend to learn from colleagues and students through sharing and bouncing ideas. When advice is passed to me, I try not to react too quickly, preferring to reflect on suggestions over time. When working on my own I try to build in moments of fast production and moments of more methodical making, and this allows for mistakes to be made and then worked through. There are times when I feel very uncomfortable working in a public place, but I try and channel this into the process. I think this is because I've always wanted what I've made to be the centre of attention, rather than the activity of making it.

Being thrown in at the deep end makes me feel quite alive and there are times when I agree to do things that I don't instinctively want to, as I know I'll learn something through doing it or other opportunities will present themselves. I love the challenge of an empty room and a pile of work to position and hang.

I usually have a cardboard piece on the desk that I'm working on. They can be quite slow to produce, but I like having something that I can continue in between other tasks. Some can take up to a year to finish. I've recently completed an electronic sign that I want to use as a prop in a short film and I hope to find time to progress this. Slightly longer term I'm interested in exhibiting more work, maybe in the form of a retrospective. When you make work over a long period its useful to be able to stand back and see what the journey has been as a way of regrouping and moving forward.

When I finished my degree with all my skills training on the latest analogue equipment, the digital camera emerged onto the high street. I remember having conversations with my colleagues and thinking about how we would practise a medium that had just gone through a technological revolution with our instantly out-of-date-skills. A year or two before, email had arrived allowing one computer to contact another. We realised that technical skills were a relatively small area of what we had learnt and that technology had always changed and will continue to do so. I made a decision to concentrate on content within my work, to explore subject matter first and use what skills I could pick up to do it. Where there were gaps in my knowledge I would collaborate, but steer the process through the critical skills I had.

[www.weareoca.com/fine\\_art/3-d-printing-really-really/](http://www.weareoca.com/fine_art/3-d-printing-really-really/)

[www.vimeo.com/117590936](http://www.vimeo.com/117590936)

[www.stephen-monger.tumblr.com/](http://www.stephen-monger.tumblr.com/)



Stephen Monger, *Tribute to Penone*, 2004

## Jo Davies

My illustration work has evolved from commercial practice and I now work less often for clients and more in what may be described as an authorial capacity. My images are underpinned by an interest in quiet narrative – observations of ordinary situations and events, often built upon my drawings from life. They have to have a function to have worth and I'm increasingly conscious of the way my images entertain or inform.

My favoured process is to generate projects and then approach clients, often raising funding with grants such as from the Arts Council and sponsors. The project I worked on for Portsmouth Hospitals Trust a couple of years ago is a good example of this working well. The project's aim was to develop a range of well-designed and illustrated materials to teach children and their families about diabetes. The funding I raised from several sources meant I could commission a design team, select illustrators and also produce a series of illustrations myself. Some of my work won a major award (3x3) in the US but the major gain was putting something valuable in place where it hadn't existed before: creating an informative and functional set of products that also held strong aesthetic value.



Jo Davies

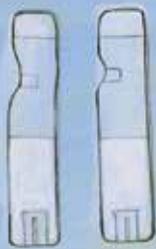
# essential kit



insulin



blood  
glucose  
meter



blood  
glucose  
testing  
strips



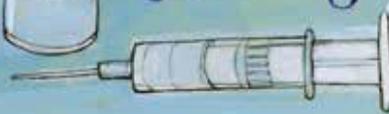
glycogel



Pen



glucagon



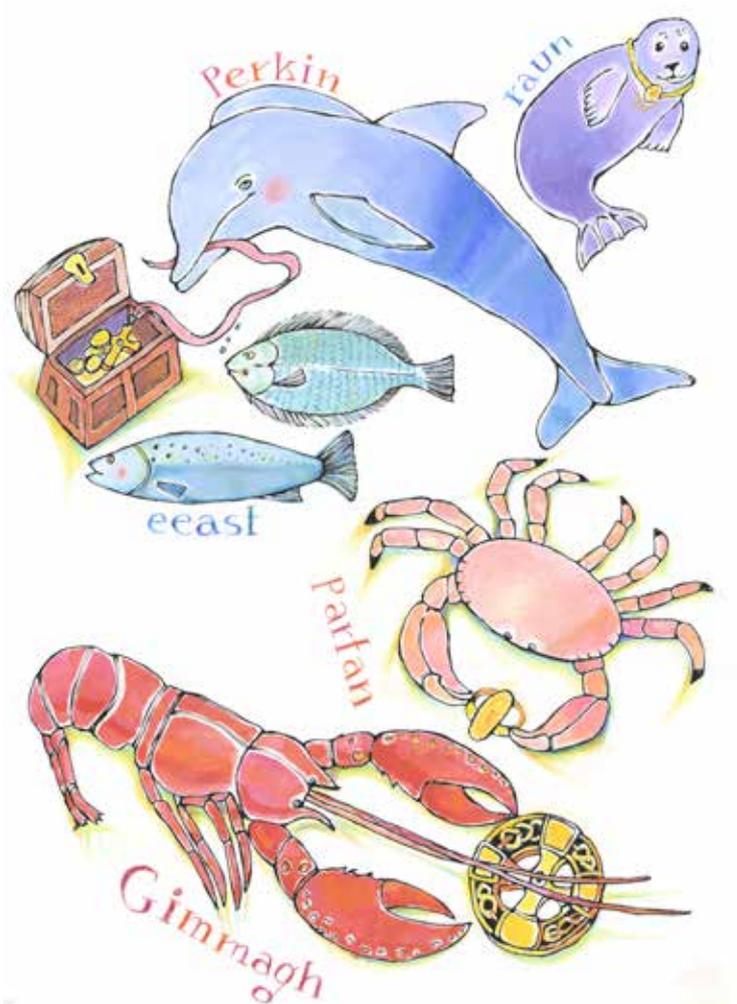
blood  
glucose  
diary



urine testing strips

One of the most important things I have learned within my methodology is to trust myself, developing judgement and believing in it. As an author of several books about illustration, and with extensive involvement in research and writing about the subject over many years, the confidence and authority I have in my own work has increased. This ability to make clearer judgement may come to anyone who sticks around long enough in a profession but I think in the past I would bend and deviate from best practice because I listened to agents and clients who sounded as though they knew best (when I now realise this wasn't the case). Developing my own voice has been the result of letting my own voice be heard.

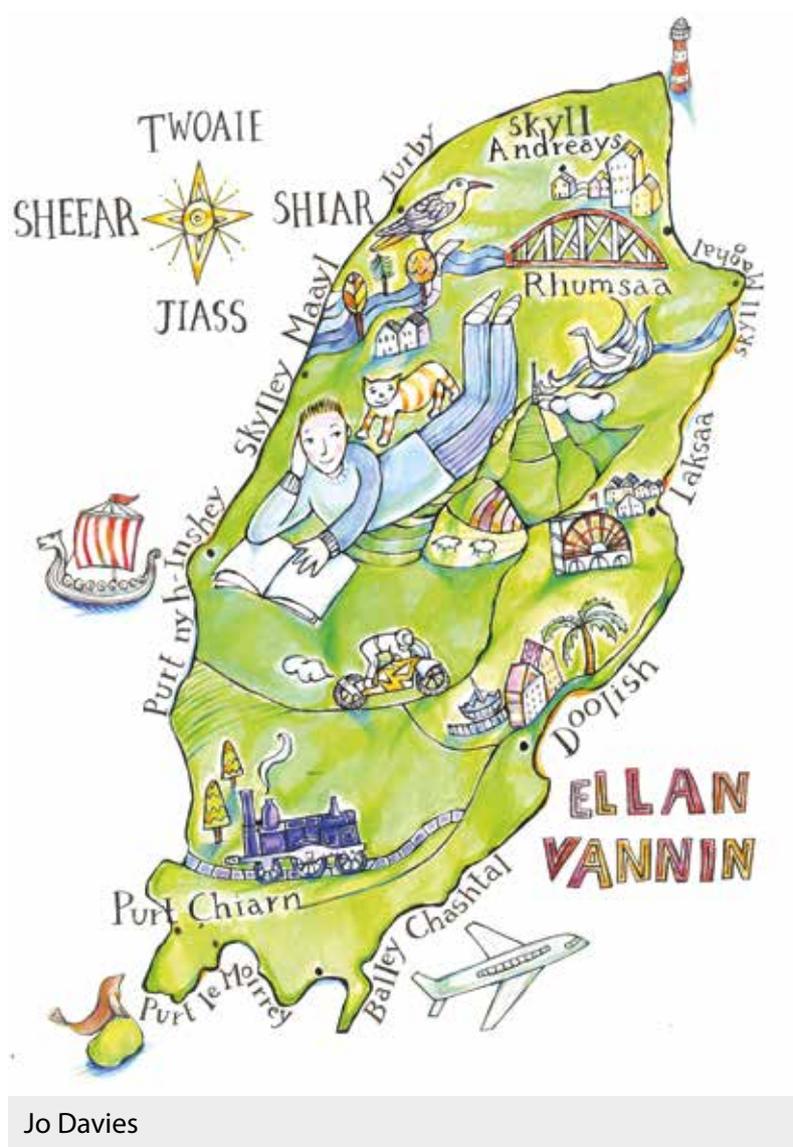
I am in the process of finishing a book I've been working on with Culture Vannin and the Arts Council aimed at teaching Manx words within an activity book for young children. I relocated to the Isle of Man in 2013 and developed the project as a vehicle for research into Manx culture and the distinctive geography and history of the island. I also wanted to produce simple line drawings (that other people could colour in!). An exhibition was staged of the artwork and I ran a set of illustration workshops with young school children. Large-scale colour banners were produced for use in schools and festivals. Working on a loosely-related sequence that combines words and imagery is always a thrill and working off the page holds appeal.



Jo Davies

Following on from the Portsmouth Hospital project, I have been tentatively researching into illustration within clinical settings and am on the edge of putting together a funding bid to take this forward and in particular research what type of illustration best suits particular clinical environments. Ironically my own recent cancer treatments have stalled the project but also galvanised me into forging forward in a more determined way. Although my work has been pigeon-holed as for children (and I am happy to work for this audience) my experience is across a demographic spectrum and I think that returning to make work in very specifically directed way will be an overdue challenge.

Although organising and creating things of value is my driving force, I enjoy the challenge of a commission – whatever that may be. The last set of work I was asked to consider by a client was a really appealing brief but as I juggle writing, research, illustration and education the deadline was impossible. Taking control of a project in its entirety gives me greater freedom and the chance to be immersed in a project and work within teams of my own choosing. The dynamic of working with other people is vital to the success I have enjoyed in my career.



Jo Davies

[www.jodaviesillustration.com](http://www.jodaviesillustration.com)

## Christian Lloyd

My practice revolves around being an educator, a graphic designer, and maintaining an arts practice, all of which is underpinned by an interest in storytelling. As an educator I work in a number of higher education institutions as well as tutoring and writing course material for the OCA. I do less day-to-day graphic design and illustration work than I used to, but it's still part of what I do and still feeds into different aspects of my practice. When I used to be more of a graphic designer, I worked in the public sector – with charities, arts organisations and community groups, rather than strictly commercial work. I was interested in applying design skills and thinking to developing educational material, campaigning tools or promoting community groups. My teaching work echoed this approach by working with students who were interested in finding meaningful ways of applying their design, photography and film-making skills in beneficial ways. So I worked with people who went on to become community artists, documentary film-makers, design activists, youth workers and educators themselves. This side of my practice has been informed by my involvement with various co-operatives, charities and other organisations over the years, coupled with a general attitude that working with other people creatively can offer you something new and unexpected.

During my degree I specialised in illustration, exploring reportage through drawing and printmaking, and interpretive illustration through image- and model-making. After graduation I continued to develop my personal work through paintings, drawings and printmaking along a range of narrative themes and motifs. Slowly this drifted into more moving image and performance work, but I see it as part of an overall body of work. My current art-based work centres around a collaborative project called Bristow & Lloyd; this focuses on work that can tell stories or prompt a conversation in some small way. We create small-scale public communications such as hand-rendered signage, letter-pressed booklets, photocopied pamphlets or street art that aims to playfully examine how we socially construct and engage with the world around us. We also occasionally work within the Yorkshire-based arts collective Black Dogs. I've always been a 'Jack of all trades', but I consider this to be a positive attribute rather than not really mastering one.

My working process differs from context to context, but I work best when I'm able to bounce ideas around with someone else. Working collaboratively, either with students, clients, other performers or with Lisa (Bristow), allows for instant feedback and often gives you something greater than the sum of its parts. Having said that, collaboration isn't without its pitfalls, so you have to embrace compromise to some degree, learn to listen and take feedback on the chin. With Bristow & Lloyd, our creative conversations usually take place in a café with close access to cakes and coffee to keep us going and paper for us to take notes. I still need to have time on my own to process conversations, find ways to visualise ideas and develop content for the work. For this I use one of my two creative spaces in the house – my office with my computer or my shed with my letterpress print equipment, paint and drawing stuff.

# HOME RULES AN EXHIBITION OF HOUSEHOLD REGULATIONS & VISITOR INSTRUCTIONS,

collated and typographically  
rendered by

*Bristow & Lloyd*

*A pair of so called 'Artists'*

[www.bristowlloyd.info](http://www.bristowlloyd.info)

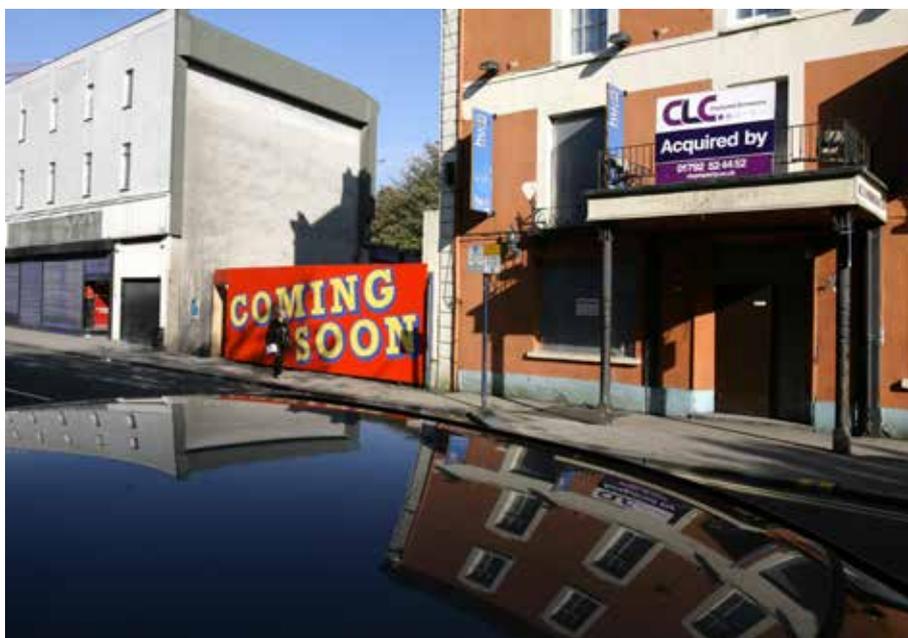


Bristow & Lloyd

I need to draw as part of my process, to understand ideas, explore relationships between ideas or simply to find ways to visualise something. Drawing really helps with collaborations; rather than explaining something I tend to draw what I'm thinking, talking through the drawing as I go. I generally like the idea development stages and I try to generate as many ideas as I can, as quickly as I can. I identify the obvious answer and challenge myself by developing unachievable but fun ideas that go beyond the obvious in some way. I'd rather compromise an adventurous idea than opt for something mediocre.

Visually, I'm interested in things that often look quite slapdash. I like things that are hand-done, amateurish or have an ad hoc quality to them, partly because I think they're honest and direct forms of communication, partly because that's how things often come out – I tend to jump in and try to resolve the visual outcome straight away. This seldom works in generating something finished, but it does tell me what some of the visual problems might be, so it's useful. Often, the challenge of resolving a piece of work rests on knowing when to stop, which is why I like to test things out by adding and removing elements. The trace of this process, say if you're working in something physical like paint, can start to become interesting and integral to the work itself as a surface. Working digitally is different. I've developed a process that acknowledges that I'll labour over a specific piece of design, testing out different layouts, etc. Once I've run through

all the variations, I'll leave it, and the next day I'll try to recreate my final design from scratch, without looking at my previous efforts. I find that I remember the visually important stuff and forget the dull stuff, so it invests the work with new life. A successful piece of work for me is one that is alive and full of possibilities. This is one of the reasons I like rougher more unfinished work, because it could still go in lots of different directions and is not presenting a fixed solution.



Bristow & Lloyd, *Coming Soon*, Swansea High Street, commissioned by Art Across the City, 2009

I learn through play, making mistakes and trying to establish underlying principles. The creative process is really about play for me. It's the same basic principle – define a game (project), explore different ways of playing the game (doing the project), use what resources you have at hand and be resourceful with them. Enjoy the process and see where you end up. Sometimes playing in this way helps to redefine the project itself. Making mistakes is harder because you're learning from the position of having tripped up and landed on your face! You learn through the process, but it can be hard work. With this in mind, I try to anticipate mistakes by asking simple unassuming questions of myself, clients and collaborators and deliberately build mistakes into my creative process by choosing the wrong aesthetics or using tools that shouldn't work to see what a mistake might look like. I'm always interested in trying to get to the bottom of what I'm working on – what's the nature of the communication or what's at the heart of a particular narrative. Sometimes this is driven by having a research question in mind. Bristow & Lloyd's *Home Rules* project sought to find out how other people governed their homes – what kinds of rules did they have and how did they enforce them? Our *Home Rules* project then explored visual strategies to help present these within a collection, hinting at some of the dynamics at play in different domestic spaces.



Bristow & Lloyd, *Home Rules* (ongoing project)

I like jumping into new projects and challenges, so having gaps in my knowledge is usually part and parcel of the process. I generally try to work out the shortest route between A to B, so I learn the skills I initially need to know and build from there. For example, I've made a number of short films and animations but I wouldn't call myself an expert film-maker! I know enough to get the results I want – I don't need to know everything there is about the camera, editing or film-making to get started. I ask myself what principles I need to know, where best can I learn these from, what resources I have, and take it from there. It's very easy to fall into the trap of saying, 'If only I knew how to do X then I could do Y'. It's a way of putting things off. So I generally work with whatever I have at hand.



Bristow & Lloyd, panel from community bridge project, Slaithwaite, 2012

There's a strong relationship between text and image in my work, especially with Bristow & Lloyd. Lisa is very much interested in writing so we often start with text or think about what questions we might ask other people to generate content for our work. I am able to work with this text visually, giving it a different tone of voice or amplifying it through the scale of the work to hint at new meanings or connections. Being aware of having an audience is important to what I do generally, partly to validate what I've done – why make work if people can't enjoy it? – and partly because I like the reaction and feedback. This is why I'm interested in creating work that feels a bit more open-ended because there's room for an audience to take what you've produced as a starting point for something new. Through Bristow & Lloyd we try to think about how we can gather comments and feedback as part of our process, so we consciously try to build this kind of feedback into the work by allowing people to contribute, talking to people early on or by making ourselves present when the work is shown so we can talk to people and find out what they're connecting to.

[www.bristowlloyd.info](http://www.bristowlloyd.info)

[www.black-dogs.org](http://www.black-dogs.org)



## Visual Communications 3: Advanced Practice

### Part one

# Understanding your practice



Analytical drawing: observation of distortion in glass, by J.D. Kenyon, student of Richard Hamilton at Kings College, University of Durham, 1965

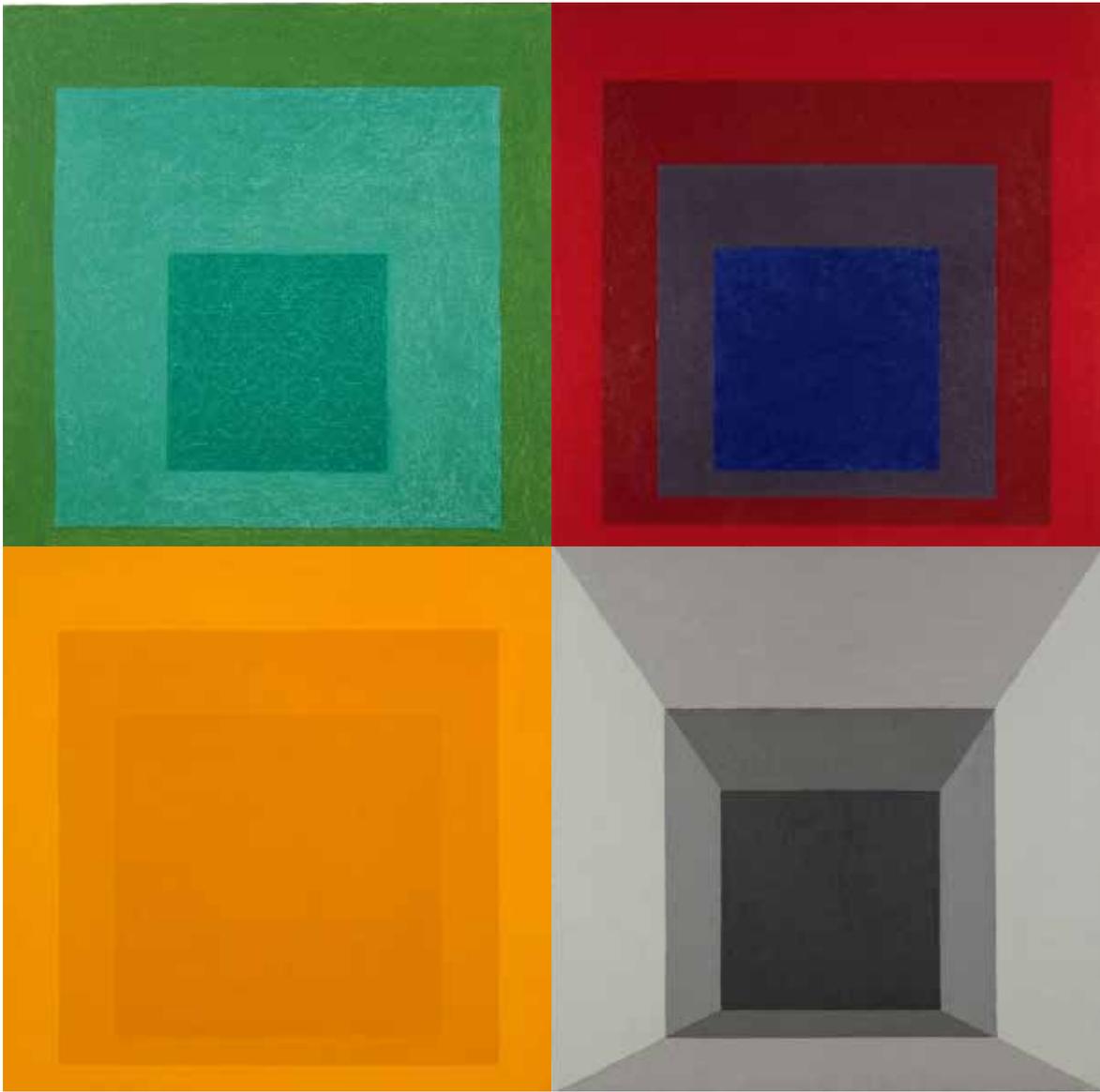
## Introduction

Gaining a deeper understanding of your practice is central to the overall experience of undertaking a degree and very much the focus of the first part of this course. When we talk about 'your practice' we are defining a range of different aspects of how you make work, how it's framed by wider ideas and practices, and the direction in which you want to develop your personal creative voice. At this stage, your practice may not be fully formed but it's useful to think about what you do, begin to describe it and signpost where you think you're heading. Reflecting on how you go about making your work and how you learn will add to this understanding and help you identify potential self-directed projects you can use to move your practice forward. Locating your practice alongside what's currently happening out in the world will give you a sense of where your discipline is heading, what skills you may need to develop and help set a benchmark for what you want to do next.

### Developing a body of work

It's harder to understand your practice if you're not making work. The exercises and assignments in this part of the course are prompts for making as well as reflection, but it would also be worthwhile initiating your own projects. These could simply be sketchbook activities that test out visual ideas or respond to prompts in new ways. Try to see the course as an opportunity to create a whole body of work that includes exercises, assignments, your own projects and other research related to your overall aims of developing your practice.

Given the structure of exercises and research tasks as stepping stones leading to an assignment, it would be easy to prioritise the assignment as the most important element. In practice, the exercises are often where the key learning takes place and are perhaps more representative of your practice because they are less guarded. Exercises are where you can make mistakes, and through this process, learn more about your creative voice. From a tutor's perspective, the exercises evidence your creative process through which you've developed your ideas and ways of working. By contrast, the assignments can be where students feel the need to prove themselves for assessment, so there's often more focus on making the work look 'finished'. Producing work to a high visual standard is important, but it can inadvertently round the corners off interesting developments or ideas. This is an observation that is worth keeping in mind for some of the activities to come in which you'll be asked to reflect on your creative process. Viewing each part of the course as a whole project, in which exercises and assignments combine, will help you to see your practice in a more holistic way. With this in mind the course has been structured to present the assignment first, followed by the exercises, so you know what you're aiming to do before you begin.



Josef Albers, *Homage to the Square*

## Assignment one

### Personal statement

Develop a personal statement that responds to the prompts listed below. Your statement should include visual examples and be a summary of your findings rather than a long narrative. Assignment One is designed to provide an overview of what you do for your tutor and to be a reflection on what you've achieved so far. Don't worry if there are areas you're less certain about or haven't defined yet. Include these kinds of uncertainties and questions into your personal statement as they provide suggestions on what you may want or need to do next.

Produce a designed version of your personal statement as a PDF document or small paper-based publication or equivalent presentation. Use the prompts as a basic structure but edit your text and content to focus your responses. For each piece of text, show a visual example to support it.

You should be aiming to develop a personal statement that outlines the kinds of practice you're interested in through your combination of text, images and design choices. See this as an opportunity to steer the assignment in a direction you find interesting, for example by applying your graphic design, book design or illustration skills in the construction of the PDF or booklet, or by creating something new as an equivalent presentation. The assignment is also an opportunity to refresh or extend your technical skills in how you lay out the booklet. Pay particular attention to the kinds of things you'd like to do next.

Share your personal statement booklet with fellow students via the forum or through Google hangout critiques. You may want to include notes on the feedback or encouragement you've received in your learning log. Here are the prompts:

- **Presenting your practice**  
Describe your practice and your creative voice at this stage. Remember that your practice might develop in a number of ways. Show examples of your work, your use of material, visual approaches, content or other elements that might help define your creative voice in some way or share common visual threads with it.
- **Locating your practice**  
Summarise your research into what contemporary practice looks like to you by talking about contemporary illustrators and/or designers appropriate to your practice, showing some examples of their work and reflecting on how you think you measure against them at this stage.
- **How you work, how you learn**  
Reflect on your working process by talking about the way in which you generate ideas and visual outcomes. Think about how you decide what is a successful piece of work for you. Reflect on your key learning moments up to this point. What do they tell you about the kind of learner you are and what you need to succeed? For example, what kinds of challenges do you respond to and what kind of feedback do you find useful?
- **What's next?**  
What kinds of projects are you interested in developing as you move forward? What are you aiming for in the longer term? What are the gaps in your knowledge? What technical skills do you need to develop to move forward? Are there other aspects of your practice that you need to inform through research?

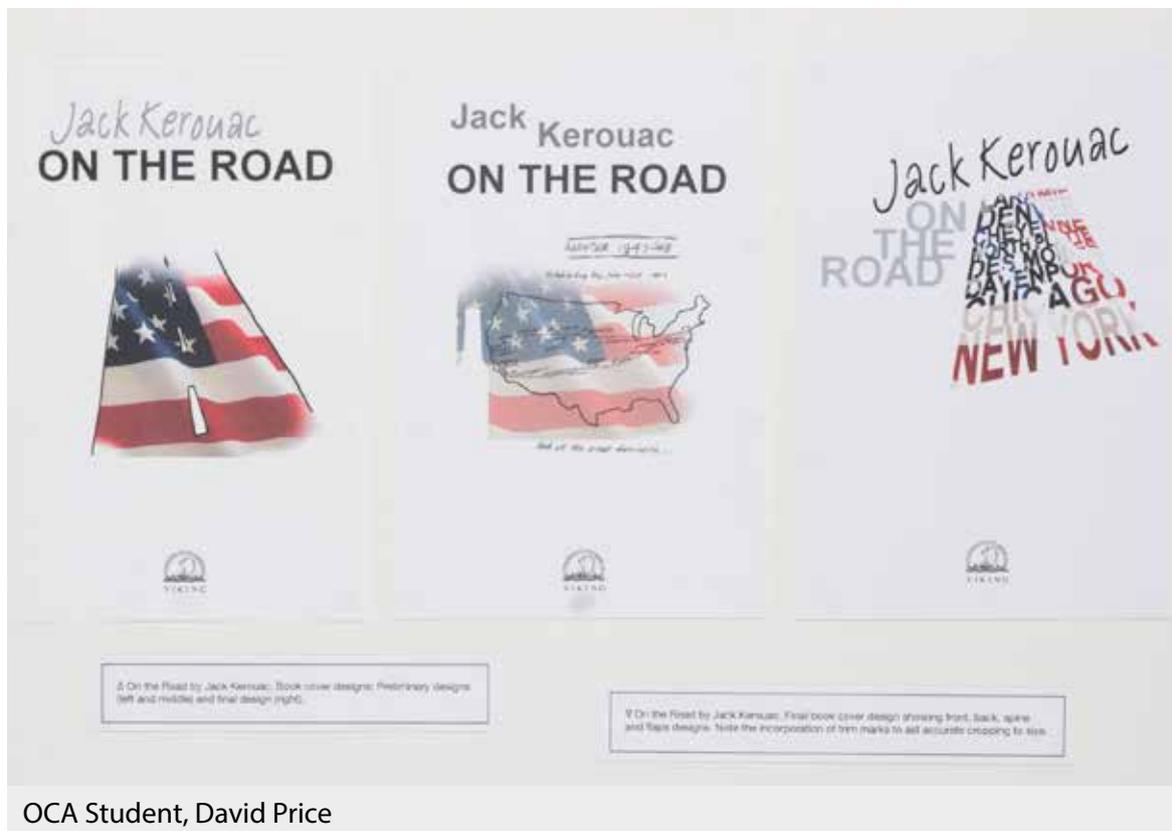


Colour exercise: spotted burnet moth, by Gill Davis, a student of Ton Hudson, 1965

**Note:** Designing for a printed booklet or designing for the web or PDF requires different qualities in the images you use. Print images need to be higher resolution. The scale of these image files, however, can cause problems for web- or PDF-based booklets because they can get too big to send via email or access online. Web resolution only needs to be 72dpi. As part of this assignment you may want to lay out your booklet as a print version, learning how to export or save a PDF at a lower resolution for the web. It's better to work from print to web, rather than web to print, because once you've reduced the resolution of your images, you won't be able to meaningfully increase it again. (You can increase dpi on Photoshop but this won't necessarily improve image quality.) If you've produced a physical booklet, you have the same issue of having to generate a web-friendly version you can share with your tutors.

Always keep a note of the resources you've accessed for future use and reflect on your learning through your learning log.

Assignment One is diagnostic so won't count towards your final grade.



## Your practice

Naming your practice is helpful in being able to articulate what you do and give you a sense of creative and professional identity. Seeing yourself as a graphic designer, an illustrator, graphic artist or a visual communicator helps define who you are and the kind of work you might make. Having said that, these disciplines encompass a lot of different specialisms that may require further labelling, for example as a children's book illustrator, a commercial graphic designer or a medical illustrator. Seeing your practice as inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary, through which you may straddle disciplines or have more than one specialism, is just as valid and perhaps more reflective of the demands of contemporary practice.

Your practice can equally be defined through the form it takes or the ideas that drive it. You may be interested in storytelling, problem-solving, persuasion or any other form of visual communication, regardless of whether it's printed, animated, digital or developed through photography. Equally, the ideas driving your work might stem from broader interests in literary forms, a desire for social change, commercial interests or a particular subculture. Graphic designer Peter Saville emerged through his involvement and interest in post-punk music, while animator, illustrator and director Tim Burton has maintained his interest in all things Gothic, regardless of the form. Identifying the kinds of things that interest you, whether this is directly related to your practice or currently just a parallel interest, will help you frame your practice more holistically and potentially provide you with content to work with on future projects.

The drive to define your area of expertise is useful if you know what you do and want people to hire you for that express purpose. However, establishing that identity can take time as it requires a level of understanding often gained over years of practice in the field. The reason you are defining your practice at this stage of your development is partly a reflective one – helping you to identify what you enjoy and what you're good at, both for yourself and your Level 3 tutors – and partly to help signpost the kinds of resources, practitioners or opportunities that would be useful for you to access out in the world. We're not asking you to decide once and for all what you want to be but rather to define your practice at this point in time. Things may change as you develop new ways of working or adopt new creative tools. The personal statement that you develop through this part of the course will probably change as you learn new things. This document will also help you prepare for the *Sustaining your Practice* course at the end of Level 3.

## Exercise 1.1 Writing a personal statement

Work your way through the following prompts as a starting point to reflect on your practice and think about how you describe it.

### 1. Review your work.

Look at your previous coursework and identify a range of your best work. This might not necessarily be your finished assignments; it could equally well come from your personal work, sketchbooks or exercises. What pieces of work do you think are most successful at presenting your interests and talents? What do these pieces of work have in common? Identify some threads that link them together visually or conceptually. You may want to re-read your previous tutor feedback reports to see if your tutor was highlighting other pieces as your best examples. Reflect on this selection process in your learning log. Why did you pick your selection? Why did you reject your other work?

### 2. Identify key words.

- Produce a list of key words that describe the form or vehicle of the work you find most interesting or would be interested in developing, for example posters, street art, typefaces, etc.
- Develop a list of the tools you most often use. Feel free to include tools you are keen to adopt.
- Produce a list of key words that describe the visual quality of your work. This list might highlight the mediums you use, the visual language you reference or the visual quality of designs or images you make. For example: digital designs, pop culture, geometric, primary colours, minimal.
- Produce a list of key words that describe the kind of content you're interested in working with. Do you design for an audience in mind or are you particularly interested in working with other subjects or disciplines? Your list can be varied and describe the range of things you do. For example, you may be interested in producing illustrations primarily for children, combining an interest in graphic design with classic literature, or developing forms of communication that explore environmental issues.

From these four lists, make a final selection of seven key words that seem most important to you. How does this list stand up against your selection of your best work? Are you describing forms of work you would like to do but haven't done yet? Reflect on the process in your learning log, identifying any future projects or areas you may like to develop.

### 3. Write your statement.

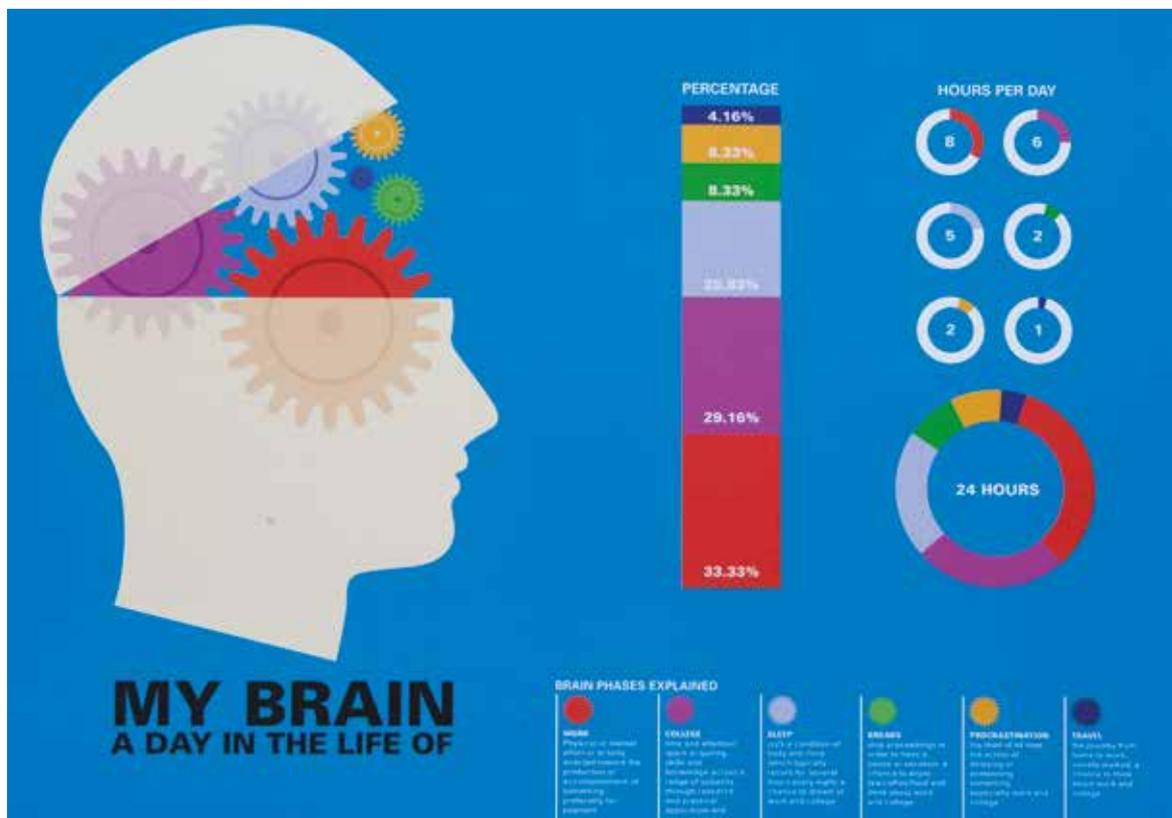
Write a short statement that describes what you do, the kinds of work you undertake and the overall feel of your creative voice. Try to summarise your statement in no more than three sentences. Don't worry if you're uncertain about your practice; you can always include this sense of questioning within your statement. Here are some examples:

- I am an illustrator with a focus on drawing and a growing interest in animation. My work revolves around drawing from life and using this material as a starting point

for my illustrations, which have mostly been editorial so far. I like to make subtle images using watercolour and pencil that tell stories about the everyday world, for example by producing a series of drawings documenting interactions at my local café.

- I am a graphic designer working primarily with digital designs who is interested in commercial branding and identities. My work makes use of clean lines, strong colours and a rounded aesthetic. I am interested in developing visual outcomes that answer the demands of a client but at the same time are visually appealing.
- I am an interdisciplinary designer, equally interested in typography and illustration. My work spans digital forms, printmaking and traditional illustration techniques such as painting with gouache. I am interested in developing work that explores the overlaps between typography and illustration; so far I have done this through paper-based pieces but would be interested in extending my work.

4. Reflect on the process in your learning log.



OCA student, Anthony Carey

## Locating your practice

Defining your practice through your personal statement, even if it's provisional or aspirational at this stage, should nevertheless give you some pointers for looking at what's currently happening in your discipline. Locating your practice is about defining what you do against broader external contexts, the historic legacy of this area or any ideas that are driving your interest. Identifying who is currently making interesting work in your discipline is a good starting point for this investigation, but obviously raises the issue of where do you start looking? Specialist journals, current publications, professional networks, galleries, blogs and media articles are all useful. Equally, online searches can give you access to a range of resources such as discussion forums, professional networks like the Association of Illustrators or the Design Council, or an opportunity to email practitioners directly. Try using your keywords as a starting point for online or library searches to identify new lines of enquiry. Galleries, high street shops and book stores will all give you some exposure to contemporary practice, be it publishing, commercial design or through a sense of current trends. Becoming aware of your discipline while out in the world will give you a feel of what's on offer. You can follow similar enquiries through newspaper articles or TV programmes that highlight or review current trends. Aim to soak up what's happening at the moment within visual communication generally as well as focusing in on areas that are closer to your own practice.



### Research point

1. Access the course reading list, OCA's online resources and other journals or reading to identify the most useful texts to help locate your practice.
2. Galleries, artist or design studios, commercial outlets, bookshops and other locations are all potential places to encounter contemporary work. Identify local opportunities and visit some of them. This may include joining OCA study visits.
3. Online resources presents a wealth of information. Identify five online resources that you can use throughout the course to help inform your understanding of contemporary practice. As a starting point, you can access a list of resources at [Link 1](#).

Aim to develop a body of research material that identifies what is currently happening in contemporary practice both generally and within your chosen area of study. Use your learning log to gather this material and reflect on your findings. Reflect on the process of gathering this research and how it has helped inform your own understanding of your practice. Summarise your evaluation for Assignment One.

See this research task as an ongoing process through which you regularly access these resources or seek out new ways to get a feel of what is happening in contemporary practice.

## Framing your work historically

Thinking about your practice within a historical framework can be equally important to defining what's going on now. Visual forms evolve but the ideas that drive them often remain the same. Many contemporary practitioners borrow forms and ideas from previous generations of designers, either to make reference to a particular period or to re-establish the principles or aesthetics in a contemporary way. Making connections between contemporary and historic designers, or vice versa, will help develop your general awareness of visual culture as well as your critical skills in being able to analyse someone else's work. You may want to repeat the previous research task from a historical perspective.



Jean Saude, *L'Art Croquis d'Animaux*

## Your relationship to technology

Given the close connection between visual communication, graphic design and illustration to media and technology through the ways it is created and disseminated, your practice will inevitably be located within a framework of technology. Recent developments in television, film, new or online media, printing techniques and mobile technologies all have an impact on the ways your work will be received. Parallel to this is an ongoing digitalisation of creative practice through the development of software and digital tools to create your work. Being aware of some of these developments will help shape your understanding of what you do and how other people might interact with your work and help you deal with changes that might be around the corner.

While technologies evolve, the principles on which they are based often remain constant. The cinema screen has given way to the television, which in turn has evolved into the portable tablet, laptop or mobile screen. The idea of watching a moving-image narrative is the same, though, even though how we watch it has changed. In the same way, the photo album has evolved from a physical archive to an online one and with it the possibilities of how we share our personal images. Framing your practice within longer historical views of technology is helpful in identifying these underlying principles. Equally, recognising an interest in a particular form of technology opens up the possibility of swapping one generation of equipment for another. For example, the recent trend for using what might be considered obsolete letterpress typesetting has come from a generation of graphic designers who developed their skills digitally. The move from new to old might signal limitations or frustrations with new technologies for these designers, a desire for simplicity, or a reaction towards a more hands-on approach. Whatever the motivation, this development has added something new to contemporary practice by revisiting existing but seldom used equipment.

*The creative process starts as an intellectual exercise. A design problem is defined, analyzed, creatively treated, and brought to a solution. Paul Rand in From Lascaux to Brooklyn defines the design process as 1) Preparation, 2) Incubation, 3) Revelation, and 4) Verification. Rand states that it is important for the illustrator to understand the relationship between aesthetics and the computer. He concludes that 'the conflict between design and technology' like the conflict between form and content, is not an either/or problem, it is one of synthesis.*

(Bruce Wands, in Heller & Arisman, 2000:44)

## Exercise 1.2 Skills audit

Identifying the technology you need to use or would like to develop can be a useful driver for the kinds of projects you undertake. Having a purpose for increasing your knowledge of software makes it easier and more enjoyable to learn. As a starting point for Assignments One and Two, undertake a skills audit to identify what you already know and measure this against your investigation into contemporary practice to identify any gaps in your knowledge that you would like to address.

Use the following prompts to get you going:

- What software do you currently use?
- How would you measure your proficiency (using the scale below)?
- What short-term improvements would you like to see in your use of software?
- What other skills do you use, for example drawing, cutting and mounting work, making mock-ups, printmaking, photography, etc.?
- How would you like to develop these?
- What aspects of contemporary practice would you like to develop?
- What skills might you need to achieve this?
- What skills do you think you need to develop?
- What would you like to do that you've not done yet?

Rate your proficiency using the scale below.

**Novice:** I'm not sure what the tools can do; I need to follow instructions to do most tasks.

**Advanced beginner:** I can do some tasks but need support for anything else.

**Competent:** I have a good idea how to do most things and could learn how to do anything else without help.

**Proficient:** I have a very good working knowledge of what the tools can do.

**Expert:** I am fully aware of the limitations of the tools.

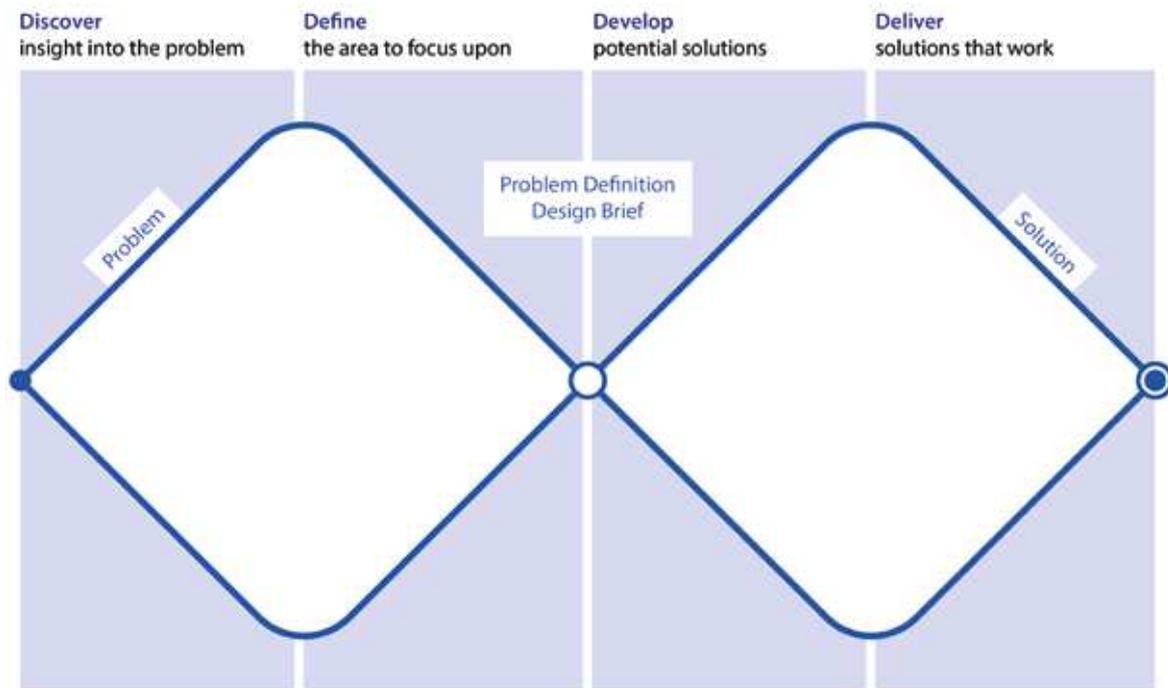
Don't worry if you still see yourself as a novice or advanced beginner. Be honest, identify the areas you need to develop and through the following assignments develop projects that can improve your skills.

## Understanding your process

A creative process describes the ways in which you initiate and develop your creative ideas. While this process has many universal elements, it also differs from individual to individual and through different kinds of practice. Understanding how this process works for you is useful in terms of being able to articulate how you work for potential clients, recognising its potential and limitations, and opening up the opportunity to adapt your approach for different kinds of projects. Your previous courses will have covered many aspects of how you analyse, research and generate ideas, before testing, refining and resolving them.

Recognising the similarity in creative approaches between different disciplines, the Design Council has developed a 'double diamond' model that visualises the ways in which designers problem-solve. Starting from the fixed point of the problem, designers broaden their approach through a discovery phase of analysis and research. Having broadened their understanding of the problem, the next phase is to define the area they are focusing on, bringing the process back to a definition of the problem or the writing of a design brief. The same movement of divergent and convergent thinking starts again by developing potential solutions before focusing back on a solution.

See [Link 2](#)



From the Design Council's double diamond diagram.

Mat Hunter, Chief Design Officer at the Design Council, explains that:

*In all creative processes a number of possible ideas are created ('divergent thinking') before refining and narrowing down to the best idea ('convergent thinking'), and this can be represented by a diamond shape. But the Double Diamond indicates that this happens twice – once to confirm the problem definition and once to create the solution. One of the greatest mistakes is to omit the left-hand diamond and end up solving the wrong problem.*

It's worth remembering that not all creative processes are problem-orientated. You may want to develop a narrative, explore a set of ideas in a more open-ended way, engage an audience or simply don't have a problem that needs resolving. Nevertheless, there is something in the Design Council's visualisation of divergent and convergent thinking that is useful to any practice. Like most creative processes, this diagram should be seen as iterative, so that the final solution could potentially be fed back into the process as a new problem that needs solving. Each of these stages will have a slightly different tool kit, depending on how you like to work, but they should all be rooted in a hands-on visual approach through which you make and develop your work.

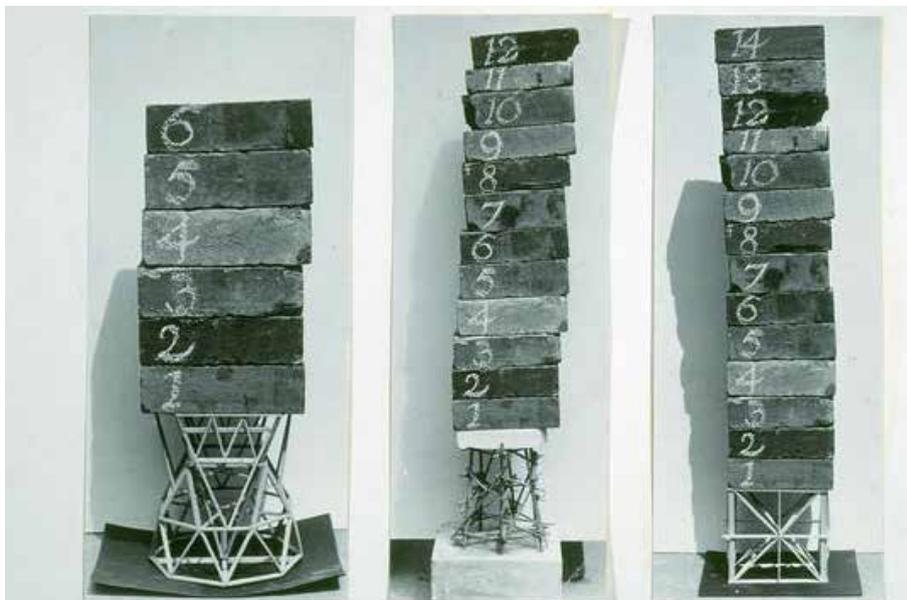
*Design is not a puzzle to be solved. There are no automatic constraints to be overcome. The constraints come from the job; the constraints are manufactured by the job. If we make assumptions about what we can and can't do we are locking off a range of potential solutions.*

(Downs, 2011, p.144)

Developing a tool kit within your creative process might involve the ways in which you:

- analyse information, take notes, ask questions and prioritise the results
- generate ideas through mind-mapping, discussions or sketchbook work
- gather and assimilate appropriate visual reference material
- produce a range of options through variation and visual play
- re-use or develop new visual languages or references
- evaluate and critique your ideas from your own and other people's perspective
- develop your ideas through further analysis, research and testing
- refine your work through editing, prioritising or simplifying.

This tool kit will vary depending on the emphasis your practice places on problem-solving over storytelling, persuasion over entertainment, or how you want your results received by an audience. Additions or variations to the process might involve finding new ways to generate ideas and research or bring in different perspectives in how you evaluate your work. In many ways, these variations are just ways to challenge our habits by finding a new shortcut or by taking a meandering route that might offer us something new and unexpected.



Exercise: line and form from a basic design class run by Tom Hudson, 1965

## Learning as a process

*It is also important for students in our field to take risks. Playing it safe cuts the learning process short and leads nowhere.*

(Thomas B. Allen from 'A Moving Target', Heller & Arisman, 2000:91)

*Without play, there would be no Picasso. Without play, there is no experimentation. Experimentation is the quest for answers.*

(Paul Rand, [Link 3](#))

As a creative practitioner, you never stop learning, so your process should be as much a learning one as a creative one. Reflecting on how you learn, where you've successfully challenged yourself to find something new in your work, and what you've taken from your mistakes, will all help you understand how you work and the kinds of activities that best suit your practice. Learning to fail sounds like bad advice, but often failure is where most of our creative learning takes place and where potential new discoveries lie.

Rather than simply 'failing', embed risk-taking into your creative process by:

- establishing challenges or harder ways to solve a problem
- allowing yourself room to play with ideas without worrying about 'finishing' the project
- adjusting the filters that edit what you think are appropriate research materials or ideas.

Try testing out ideas, materials or starting points that seem less obvious. Aim to find new ways of working or new paths to solve a visual problem. Find room to incorporate chance developments or parallel ideas and keep on your toes by always making things a little bit harder for yourself. This advice simply points towards finding new ways to engage with divergent thinking. Equally important is how you continue to develop your reflective and evaluative skills to help support your convergent thinking. Bringing risk into this aspect of your practice might involve asking new questions, taking up different viewpoints to review your work, or bringing other people into the process.



### Research point

See also:

Brian Eno (1979)

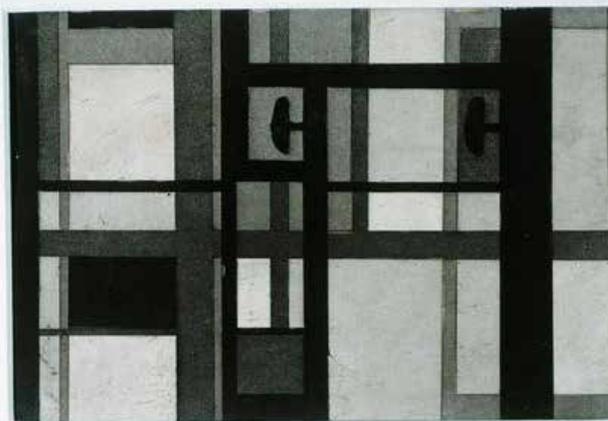
*Oblique Strategies*

Stefan Sagmeister

(2008) *Things I have*

*learned in my life so*

*far* [Link 4](#).



Exercise: space division, by student of Richard Hamilton at Kings College, University of Durham, 1965

### Exercise 1.3 Creatively exploring your process

This exercise aims to short-circuit your existing creative process by suggesting a range of new non-linear prompts to respond to and learn from. Use an existing piece of graphic design, illustration or art as a starting point. Don't agonise over your choice – pick the first postcard or image you find. You may want to access the Bridgeman Education online library via the OCA student site to find an image. See this as a short exercise that you can adapt and repeat. Again, try not to be too self-conscious about how you do this or your results.

Use the following prompts to start developing visual ideas in your sketchbook. Each prompt might represent 5–10 minutes of creative activity. Select three to get you going, before returning to add more stages in your process. Aim to fail and learn through the process rather than trying to create something you know you can achieve.

- Define it
- Make it bold
- Let's look at the real thing
- Introduce time, motion and sound
- What is the key moment?
- Create a variation
- Connect play, fantasies and daydreams
- Combine seemingly arbitrary content
- Erase the distinctions between original and copy
- Consider again your motivation
- Make it obvious
- Make it ambiguous
- Remind yourself
- Bounce around at speed
- 'We've got a problem, Houston'

Circle your best three ideas.

Reflect on the experience of working through this process. Where did it positively challenge the ways you normally work? What new elements might you include in your creative process in future?

Summarise your experiences and reflections for Assignment One. Think about how you describe your own creative process. How do you integrate research, convergent and divergent thinking and critique into your process?

*The exercise itself was designed through a process of randomly selecting pages from a number of teaching books and picking out any suitable actions. You may want to amend this exercise by reorganising the order in which you do these activities or extend it by finding other ways to challenge your process.*

## What's next?

Having reflected on your practice, located it through research, and considered your skills and creative process, the final stage is to identify self-initiated projects that will allow you to develop what you need or want to do next.

While the majority of visual communication projects are driven by the relationship with a client in one way or another, it's common for illustrators and graphic design to initiate their own projects to provide a framework to test out ideas, create a new portfolio and/or develop new ways of working or skills. Self-initiated projects can be based on working with a designated theme, in response to a chosen starting point, or simply be an ongoing way of working from which ideas emerge, for example by regularly drawing in a sketchbook.

You should be able to describe a good project brief simply in one sentence, with additional details and any context following this initial statement. It could represent an opportunity to question, explore or develop your work, so the prompt should be open-ended. Equally, it could present the details of a problem that needs resolving.

### Exercise 1.4 What's next?

Assignment One asks you to reflect on the kinds of projects you're interested in developing as you move forward. Think about this in the context of how you've framed your practice. What are you aiming for in the longer term and what kinds of projects might help to get you there? If you know you want to be a graphic designer working with infographics, then finding some statistics to work with would give you the raw content to develop your designs. To extend this approach, you may want to gather your own statistics or find innovative ways of visualising other forms of data.

Would a collaborative project help you achieve your goals? If so, what kinds of projects might you be interesting in joining or establishing? At this stage you don't have to present established ideas, just an indication of what you might like to do.

You've already thought about any gaps in your knowledge, by reflecting on both contemporary practice and through reviewing your technical skills. Think about what you may *need* to do, as well as what you *want* to do. This could include developing wholly new areas just to see if you like them. For example, you may have not had the opportunity to test out your photography or animation skills which could then feed back into your designs and illustrations.

## Completing Assignment One

The prompts for Assignment One, outlined at the start of Part One, asked you to:

- present your practice
- locate your practice
- reflect on how you work and how you learn
- identify what's next.

Re-read the assignment prompts in more detail, then read through your learning log notes to identify how you're going to respond to them. Don't forget to include visual examples to support your personal statement.

When you're ready, send Assignment One to your tutor.



Michael Fleming, *Colour exercise*, 1965

## Assignment two

### Edit and amend

Assignment One encouraged you to think about what kind of work you'd like to develop at this stage, the external frameworks that inform your practice, the kind of creative and learning process you've developed to support it, and what's next in terms of what you'd like to do or the skills you need to develop. Spend some time reviewing your tutor feedback for Assignment One and reflect on it in your learning log. You may want to amend your personal statement to reflect any changes you want to make. Following on from this reflective process, Assignment Two focuses on how you'll put some of this into practice.

#### 1. Edit

Through the review you've undertaken in creating your personal statement, you'll have revisited work from previous courses and levels. All of these pieces will have been useful in your learning and all reflect your skills level at a particular point in your development. Choose a project you'd like to revisit and redo. This could be an unsuccessful exercise or assignment, a piece of work that no longer reflects your personal voice or technical skills, or a project you'd like to continue or develop in some way. Redo the project, presenting the original and new bodies of work alongside each other, together with a reflection highlighting the differences and what this might say about your developing practice.

#### 2. Amend

Having identified gaps in your knowledge through your personal statement, establish a self-directed project that allows you to explore and develop these skills. Don't worry too much about the content of the project; this assignment should focus on your working process, developing your skills and improving the visual quality of the work. To do this you could:

- continue to revisit previous projects
- work on areas you've already signposted to explore through your personal statement
- convert existing work into digital, animation or other formats that push your technical skills
- focus on drawing in your sketchbook – not all skills are based around technology
- use a simple set of rules to explore the visual possibilities of your work.

Both parts of this assignment provide an opportunity to develop a body of work, so there could be multiple outcomes. Document your work for your tutor, summarising what you wanted to achieve by editing and amending your work and what you feel you've gained by doing so. What else do you feel you need to work on and how might you do this as the course progresses? Write a short reflection in your learning log and submit it along with your work.