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**A COMING OF
GRAPHIC AGE(NCY)**

HAMISH BESLEY

AN EXEGESIS

SUBMITTED IN

PARTIAL FULFILMENT

OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR

THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

AT MASSEY UNIVERSITY,

WELLINGTON,

NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT

A graphic designer is not just a passive shaper of content, they are authors, producers, collaborators, parasites and much more. Building upon the debates of graphic authorship in the 1990s, *A Coming of Graphic Age(ncy)* investigates how a contemporary graphic design practice can discover agency by undertaking experimental modes of working. Using the writings of Michael Rock as a foundation this research first adheres to more conventional methods of design where client concern and graphic humility are prioritised. Eventually, the rigidity of these modes are found to be disadvantageous to a designer looking to grow their creative practice. In response, new modes of working are suggested. Embracing experimental approaches to conventional design processes it is discovered that there are in fact many roles/modes a designer can embrace. Each having a unique impact on the designer's sense of agency. By revisiting one of design's most pivotal times, this story contextualises the contemporary graphic designer and uses this foundation to construct new outlooks. It is about the maturing that can happen when a way of practising is challenged – *A Coming of Graphic Age(ncy)*.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1994, designer and writer Michael Rock published the critical essay *The Designer as Author*. This essay was a stand-out amongst a sea of writing produced by designers that questioned their role in a new world where design and production were now encapsulated within a desktop computer. To other writers like Ellen Lupton this offered a chance for designers to hold the means of production closer to their practice. With this new technology came a repackaging of the contemporary designer's job description. No longer was graphic composing the graphic designer's only responsibility. They could now become author, producer, publisher, director, artist, and more.

My decision to undertake a master's degree was driven by a feeling that beyond knowing how to formalise content to fit contemporary graphic conventions I was at a loss. I realised that my lecturers did not establish their careers by being a passive intermediary between client and computer. They demonstrated a closer relationship between form and content, a closer relationship between designer and author.

Embedded in these contemporary design practices was the idea of a more critical way of thinking and working. Their work engaged techniques beyond typographic systems and grid structures. This design was not the translation of other visions; it was having a hand in the making and shaping, that was more than execution of graphic standards. It was something more like producing, or facilitating, or instigating, or...

The practice of the 21st century designer is directly influenced by the debates in the 1990s over authorship. The contemporary ways of designing and the relationship these designers have with content and form are shaped by the agency and definitions that arose from this discussion. As a designer born mere days before the 2000s, educated in the 2010s, and now practising in the 2020s, the world of an 'all in one designer' is all I have ever known. The continued proliferation of accessible production technology has meant that the means of making have never been more in the hands of the graphic designer.

Before revisiting this conversation, I was only capable of streamlining content, making it smooth and digestible by formatting it to graphic design conventions. This was in stark contrast to the agency displayed in contemporary design practices. Thanks to the democratisation of production equipment and the critical analysis of the discipline which followed, the contemporary designer is no longer just a formaliser of content. Today they have a hand in all stages of production, from ideas and creation to production and publishing. The great designers, like those I saw around me, had the capabilities of an active designer – engaging with, shaping, and responding to content. This was my goal, I wanted to make outputs whose beauty extended past the graphic composition. But, I needed to discover the agency to do that.

This exegesis is both a contextualization and a reflective exercise. My work and their precedents are distilled and exposed. I tell the story of how this work came to be and why. It is a story about finding a practice and the maturing that can happen when a way of working is challenged – a coming of graphic age(ency).

HISTORY

A full history of design authorship could span over a hundred years. William Morris for example, in 1891 was heavily concerned with how *The Story of the Glittering Plain* combined text, image, and physical construction (Beckwith, 2013). And in the 1960s *The Medium is the Massage* 'coordinated' by Jerome Agel, intertwined the written content of media analyst Marshall McLuhan with the graphic composition of designer Quentin Fiore in order to reflect the growing media saturation of the 1960s (Schnapp, 2010).

However, it was the discussions of graphic authorship in the 1990s that began to coalesce and dissect this line of thought. The individual arguments in the writing that appeared during this time varied, but they were all linked by their critique of design's old ways, and its future. It centred on the idea that designers, professionals, who until the mid-90s had remained in the background, were deserving of more recognition for their work. Some claimed that as central figures in the formalisation of the visual world, they were – in part – originators, or creators of the work the public saw (Lupton, 1998). This discussion was partially a result of the personal computer being accessible to the masses. Processes that were once highly skilled to particular professions such as researching, writing, typesetting, photo manipulation, illustration, printing, and binding, could now be done by the designer all at one desk. (McCarthy, 2013).

By the spring of 1996 the authorship debate had flooded design publications. In issue 20 of *Eye Magazine*, Michael Rock's (1996/2019) essay *The Designer as Author* criticised the concept of designers being authors, arguing that it demands unnecessary control over content when design should instead aim for open reading and textual interpretation. Other critics like Ellen Lupton (1998) in *The Designer as Producer* concurred – authorship suggested agency, intention, and creation, whereas design incurred more passive functions like consulting, styling, and formatting. Design was a distinctly separate entity.

So, if not “authorship”, what term best describes the role of the contemporary designer? Whereas Lupton’s argument was for designers to understand this distinction and embrace the totality of making by becoming Designer as Producer, Rock’s response to the call for design to legitimise itself was to offer up three new definitions for how a designer may be engaged – Translator, Performer and Director. Rock’s titles didn’t stick, but the idea was planted that designers could (and should) seek a greater form of personal freedom and expression. (Blauvelt, 2010).

Gradually, these ideas of autonomy and agency filtered down from senior designers educated in the 1990s to the junior designers working and studying underneath them in the 2000s. The result is a contemporary landscape where it can often be overlooked how influential a designer can be over content and its formalisation (McCarthy, 2013).

ADHERENCE

As an emerging graphic designer looking to expand the ways I could operate, Rock's systematic distilling of a designer's involvement appealed to my logic-bound brain. Lupton's wider definition of a Producer seemed too loose and undefined for me. It appeared that the linear scale of control in Rocks proposed modes offered a road map for discovering how to engage with graphic design beyond formalisation.

The roles of Designer as Translator, Performer, and Director, each represent a state in which a designer has varying levels of input. In the Translator role, this is limited control over how another vision is executed. A Performer has greater free rein, handling the production whilst also influencing how the content will be formalised. In Director the wider composition becomes important. Here, everything leading, following and surrounding the graphic output is subject to the influence of the Designer as Director. My first phase of research was a period of adherence to these modes/roles where I discovered how they functioned in practice.

Designer as Translator

Designer as Translator, as described by Rock (1996/2019), is based on the "assumption that the act of design is, in essence, the clarification of material or the remodelling of content from one form to another. The ultimate goal is the expression of a given content rendered, in a form that reaches a new audience" (para.35). An example of a Designer as Translator operating between the concept of authorial intentions and software is *Painting from the Holocaust's Barbaric Periphery – a Personal Journey*. As a Translator executing someone else's vision my actions were much like that of an actor. I was under strict instruction from the director (author). My lines (text) and props (images) were given to me by the director (author), along with instructions on when to use each of them. As the actor, I decided exactly where on the stage (the page) I would stand and in what voice (font) I would speak. Michelanne Forster, a second year MFA student

needed someone who could turn her generic ‘word file’ into the document she envisioned. The layout of text and image were prescribed by her in detail. What decisions were left to me were small technical details – paper size, margin size, and text size.

The Crystal Goblet, Or Why Printing Should Be Invisible is a classic essay written by Beatrice Warde in 1930. Both loved and revered in the world of design, Warde’s text employs the use of metaphor by comparing the page and type to a crystal glass, holding content in place. The designer needs to put their ego aside and make their presence barely felt. The written word and its author content was to be centre stage (Warde, 1956). She wrote that an understanding of ‘graphic humility’ is important to a successful designer’s practice. However, *Painting from the Holocaust’s Barbaric Periphery* and its need for invisible typography reminded me of why I was striving to surpass the role of Designer as Translator. Operating within the confines of conservative graphic conventions was something I had mastered in my Bachelor’s degree and it had provided limited opportunities for creativity. A practice capable of operating solely as Translator is confined to restricted opportunities in graphic design. Beyond refining small technical skills such as typesetting, executing others instructions didn’t teach me anything I didn’t already know. In order to grow my practice I need to have agency and claim greater influence on the design process.



Figure 1: Printed book with one of the paintings from *Painting from the Holocaust's Barbaric Periphery — a Personal Journey*, by Michelanne Forster & Hamish Besley, 2021.

False Starts and their Benefits

At the end of 2020 I proposed *Painting and Exile* as my exegesis topic. Josephans, the editor of *Artists in Exile: Expressions of Loss and Hope*, states that we should move beyond the well-known story of male artists forced to leave Germany and other European countries because of Nazism. But for me, that story was a new one. I learned about the infamous "Entartete Kunst" (Degenerate Art) exhibition in Munich and the so-called degenerate artists who were mocked and banned, including Max Beckmann. Aided by the American Emergency Rescue Committee, artists who fled Hitler were able to gain teaching positions in institutions across America, thus influencing a new generation of artists. Without investigating these artists I would have missed the historical context behind many paintings I admired.

Over the summer of 2020 I began to have doubts about my proposed exegesis, *Painting and Exile*, because the topic didn't specifically address Jewish identity as an artist. But how does one paint Jewish identity? I took a detour, reading *Jewish Art: A Modern History* which quickly deconstructed the idea that the Jews were a "nation without art" (Baskin and Silver 15). The authors argue that after the Heikalah (enlightenment) when European Jews moved out of ethnically homogeneous ghettos/shetles, they were forced to negotiate the space between whatever dominant culture they lived in, and their Jewish identity. This, they say, is the commonality in all Jewish art; an awareness of "otherness", or what the black writer W.B. DuBois calls "double-consciousness" (11). I went to Te Papa and mulled over McCahon's use of Christian symbols within our landscape. Why not, I thought, use a seven-branched menorah, planted in the New Zealand landscape? Ritual objects and symbols integrated into landscape painting would say Jews are a part of this country's history, and that idea appealed to me. In February 2021 I proposed a new exegesis topic: *Jewish Identity in the New Zealand Landscape*.



Fig. 4 Red Menorah by author. Acrylic on canvas, March 2021.



Fig. 5 Blue Menorah by author. Acrylic on canvas, March 2021.

Red Menorah bursts out of Otago hills like a monster in a science-fiction film. The seven-branched menorah, an important symbol of the Jewish people, is used as a life-force emerging from the landscape. In retrospect, the menorah looks cartoonish and flat, and doesn't offer the dignity and beauty I feel it deserves. *Blue Menorah*, which I consider a more successful work, is mysteriously rich. The shape is ambiguous but alive; it could be a tree in a nocturnal landscape or a figure reaching skywards. The colour, a mixture of alizarin red, cerulean and primary cyan, is the painting's strength. The layered hues of blue suggest an eternal and natural unity. Satin gloss additive in the paint gives the hue of a religious icon.

Consider *Mountain Menorah*

Figure 2: Digital spreads from *Painting from the Holocaust's Barbaric Periphery – a Personal Journey*, by Michellanne Forster and Hamish Besley, 2021.



Fig. 6 Mountain Menorah by the author. Oil on canvas, August 2021.

A highly glazed menorah dominates a fantasy landscape. A mountain in the centre of the painting sits behind it, and further mountain ranges recede into a deep blue sky, animated by a yellow moon. Flowers, birds and unidentified flying shapes add an element of imaginative play. There is no solemnity in this painting. This menorah is surrounded by an abundance of life. Paint coils and twists over the canvas. This work, painted six months after I first started experimenting with the menorah shape, demonstrates my increasing confidence with colour, glazes and composition. Chagall's influence is evident in the use of perspective, free-floating shapes and non-representational colour.



Fig. 7 Torah crown and Bells, Personal photo by the author, March 2021.

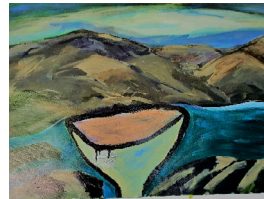


Fig. 8 Kiddush Cup by the author. Acrylic on paper, March 2021.

When investigating *Jewish Identity in the New Zealand Landscape*, I spent time at the Wellington Jewish Community Centre (WJCC) under the helpful guise of the archivist, to see if other ritual objects or memorabilia might provide shapes to work with. I placed a Kiddush cup, used to drink wine to welcome in the Sabbath, over Wellington Harbour. The mountains capture a sense of land surrounded by the sea, but the Kiddush cup has a science-fiction flatness that sits uneasily next to the McCahon-style boulders on its right. At my first crit a classmate pointed out that I needed to consider the implications of viewing Aotearoa as an empty land or backdrop for my own cultural symbols. I realized then, that unless I grappled with the implications of colonization, a subject I didn't feel confident about, I would not be doing justice to my topic, or to tangata whenua. In addition, landscape painting as a genre was proving problematic for me. Although I looked at New Zealand landscapes by, among others, Alfred Sharpe, A.J. Cooper, William Hodges, and Doris Lusk, I was already restless. This country's landscape lacks the patina of childhood memories and the cultural connectedness that comes with that. Simon Schama, in the prologue to his book *Landscape and Memory*, tells us landscape is a bearer of history, memory and dreams (8). He recounts how the forest of his ancestors in the Southern Lithuanian became a colony of death when the Germans occupied Poland in 1939. To create a Jew-free forest zone, 900 villagers were forced to dig a mass grave then massacred. Survivors were hunted down in the woods. This part of Jewish history, long embedded in my inner landscape, was where my true interest lay. I realized I had to paint 'there' before I could paint 'here.'

Consider Forest

Figure 3: Digital spreads from *Painting from the Holocaust's Barbaric Periphery – a Personal Journey*, by Michellanne Forster and Hamish Besley, 2021.

Designer as Performer

I began to have a greater influence on the graphic composition in Designer as Performer. Rock (1996/2019) states that the Performer “transforms and expresses content through graphic devices. The score or script is enhanced and made whole by the performance. And so, the designer likewise becomes the physical manifestation of the content, not author but Performer, the one who gives life to, who speaks the content, contextualising it and bringing it into the frame of the present” (para.38).

Laura Duffy is an artist who predominantly uses physical sculpture and A.I generation to explore queer theory. In mid-2021 she held an exhibition entitled, *Someone is Starting to Bloom*. Laura presented me with the idea of turning this exhibition into a book documenting the show’s development whilst extending her exhibition and her ideas. Here I assumed the role of Designer as Performer, Just like an improv actor I was armed with a provocation (the context of Laura’s work) and props (the content). It was then up to me to turn these newfound props into a graphic performance that embodied the provocation.

Informed by Laura’s use of A.I to create abstract video work, I designed the final book using a random number generator (RNG) to decide the book’s compositions. Using basic software each image and line of text was assigned a number corresponding to a specific page, grid position, and size. Each page was also assigned a number which defined paper size, and the original order of pages was then scrambled. Only a short text written in response to the exhibition adhered to any linear order, appearing sequentially throughout the book.

With this shift in role and the resulting freedom, Designer as Performer offered me the opportunity to challenge my long established view of the graphic designer’s function. Before this I viewed my role to be exactly that of Warde’s Crystal goblet – invisible. However, without typography words have no form, and there is no voice to let those words be heard. A passive voice is not enough for a book to truly function. In the role of Performer, I was able to use graphic design that actively promoted meaning. Projects like *Someone is Starting to Bloom* come alive with a designer who can make the form

scream, shout and push. Then the content's meaning is amplified in the most impactful way. As Matthew Butternick (2016) puts it "The reason we care about clothing and speaking style – and typography – is because they're all part of the presentation of an argument. And presentation matters specifically because it's not meaningless. It reinforces our core message by adding its own complementary meaning" (para.7). Graphic humility has its place but if content is given passive form then the designer has not done their job to amplify it.

My practice grew when I took on the role of a Designer as Performer. I concluded that a successful graphic designer must have the ability to create a relationship between form and content that best serves its desired purpose, regardless of the author's level of input. In a strange way, the act of honoring text by standing aside can be dishonorable. Beatrice Warde's conservative approach argues that a good speaking voice is inaudible as a voice. My experience as a Performer taught me that letting an author's words carry in an inaudible tone is not fighting for their cause. A good designer can give them a voice that carries across a room, so that the content is digested in the most influential manner. Having claimed greater agency as Performer I was able to use my expertise as a graphic designer to create an effective visual output. Integrating a unique RNG composition system, its graphic voice totally embodied the content. This outcome was obtained by the designer having great control over the process and influencing the vision.

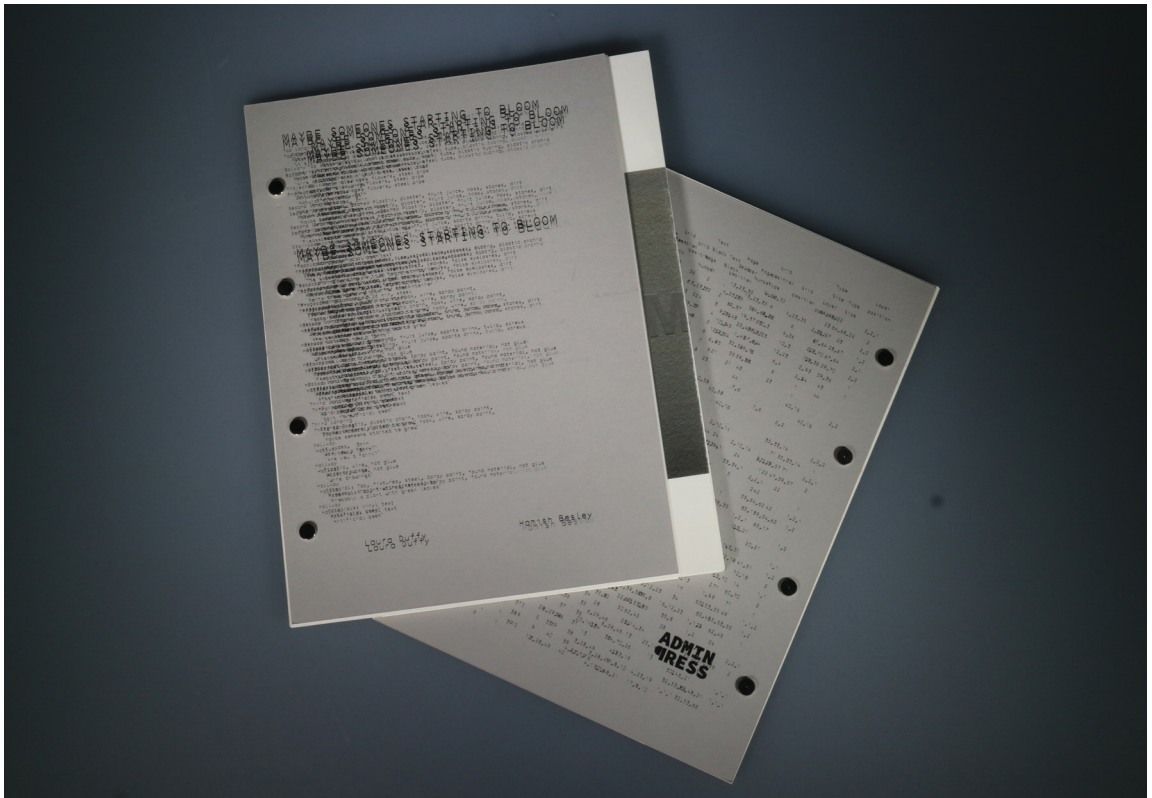


Figure 4. Cover of *Someone is Starting to Bloom*, by Laura Duffy & Hamish Besley, 2021.

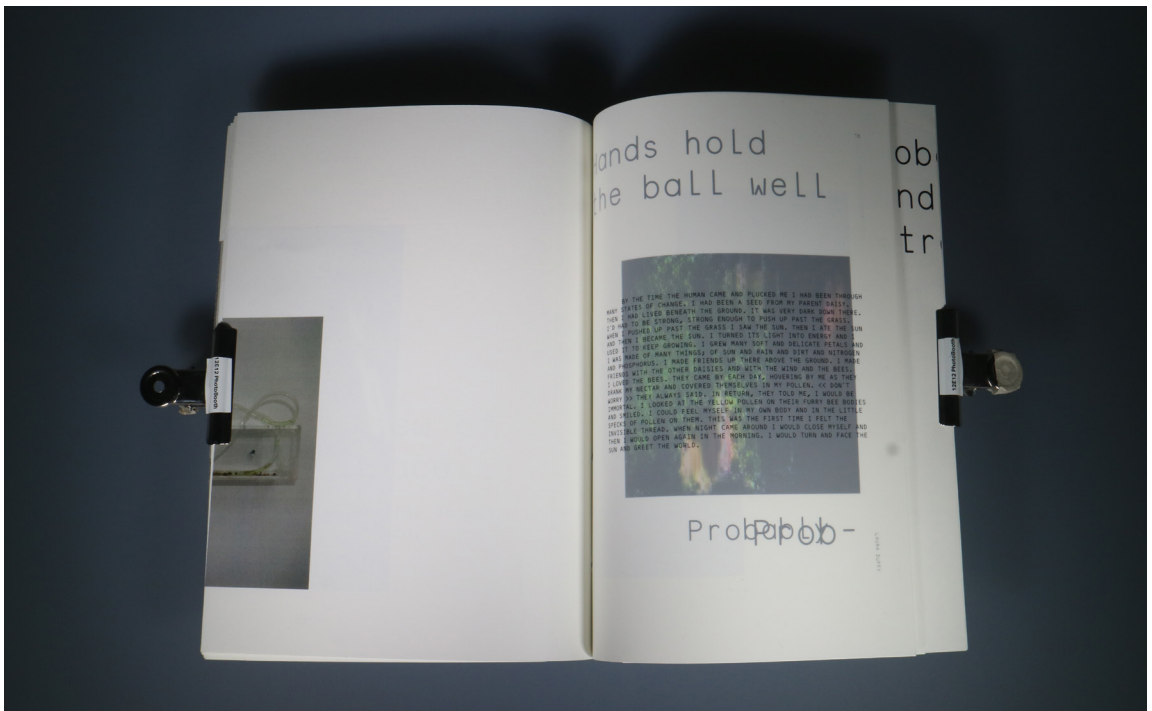


Figure 5. Double page spread from *Someone is Starting to Bloom*, by Laura Duffy & Hamish Besley, 2021.



Figure 6. Single page with transparent paper from *Someone is Starting to Bloom*, by Laura Duffy & Hamish Besley, 2021.

Designer as Director

Rock (1996/2019) defines Designer as Director as a mode concerned with the: “function of bigness. Meaning is manufactured by the arrangement of elements, so there must be many elements at play... In such large projects, the designer orchestrates masses of materials to shape meaning, working like a film director, overseeing a script, a series of performances, photographers, artists, and production crews. The meaning of the work results from the entire production” (para.40).

Baggy Pants & Butter Paper (BP&BP) is a self-initiated, authored, designed and published magazine that collects interviews with design and architecture students from Victoria University. It is focused on disseminating student-led conversations about their creative practices and university experience. Issue two, produced in 2021 included three interviews: Xanthe Copeland and Renati Waaka, two communication design graduates and Hamish Wilson, an architecture graduate. The publication was distributed free on the *BP&BP* website and physical copies were made available at cost price through a print on demand service.

As Director the entire output was my creative vision. Just as a director leading a play, it was my job to ensure that all of the parts of the wider composition came together in one cohesive work. In the creation of *BP&BP*, I organised a script (the interviews), cast actors (the interviews), organised the scenes into a larger composition (the magazine) and then oversaw its release into the world. I was concerned not only with the content or the final form but how these and other elements combined into a larger work. All general stages of the book design process – ideation, generation, formalisation, execution, and dissemination were under my direct influence. I embedded narrative and information into everything *BP&BP* touched, not just the magazine page.

When making *BP&BP* engagement with the elements off of the page became more important. At the same time, so too did theories concerned with the wider function of graphic design. Directors are concerned with the large-scale operation and the whole of a project, rather than mere form. Until this time the physical qualities of graphic composition were all that had been relevant to my practice. Assuming

the role of Director I had created public facing work of my won design. I became a publisher. The most overarching definition of publishing is as writer Michael Bhaskar defines “a set of historical processes and practices – composition, editing, design and illustration, production, marketing and promotion, and distribution – and a set of relations with various other institutions – commercial, legal, educational, political, cultural, and, perhaps, above all, other media” (as cited in Gilbert, 2016, p.11). As Director, suddenly I was using my graphic design practice to do more than make information look and function better. I was concerned with what the content actually consisted of and its purpose in this world. As I started to engage with the wider function of graphic design, reaching the final role in Rocks framework had succeeded in opening my practice to another potential of a graphic designer’s greater role in production.



Figure 7. Double page spread from *Baggy Pants & Butter Paper*, by Hamish Besley, 2021.

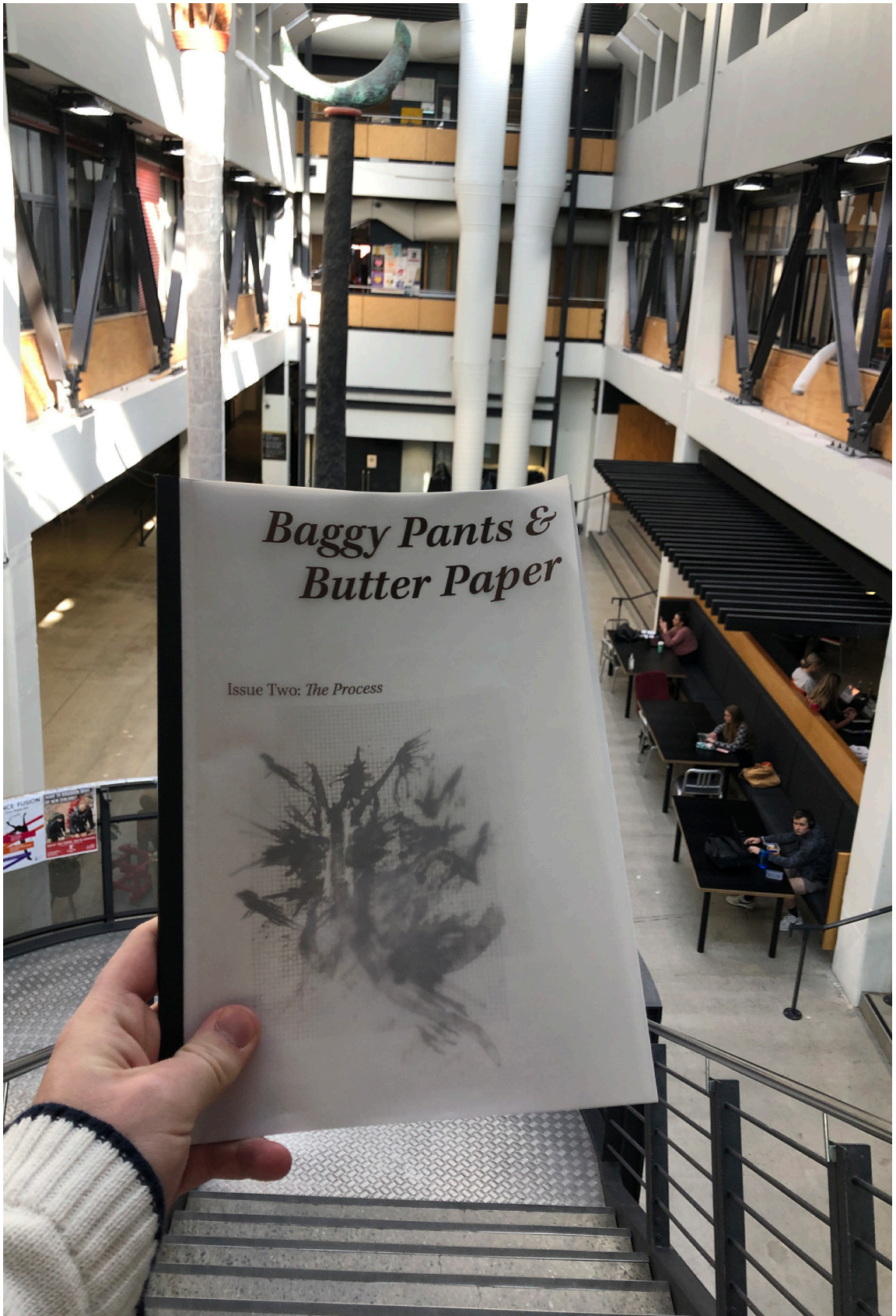


Figure 8. Cover of *Baggy Pants & Butter Paper*, by Hamish Besley, 2021.



How big a part does social media play in your practice?

All of the stuff I have gotten love has been through social media. It's pretty important. It's easier to spread my work that way and really easy to expand my network.

Is there a certain approach you take to running your social media?

No. I just post stuff and hope it does well. I don't really pay attention to numbers.

It's about the interaction.

Yeah, definitely. It's encouragement!

On the other end of the spectrum, what project are you least proud of?

Second year typography. Like that whole course. And all kinds of random shit.

Why?

My brain just doesn't work in a technical way. I think more conceptually. For me typography has a lot of rules. There's a lot of parts of typography I love or don't like. Usually no one but other typographers are going to notice that. Coding just scares me.

Do you think your upbringing has influenced the path you have chosen?

In terms of being Maori. Storytelling, innovation, and creativity is a part of my DNA, it's ancestral. Both of my parents practice traditional Maori art forms. I think creativity has just kind of run on me. My creative interests were always nurtured.

I get a sense with you that is never art's for art's sake. Or more to the point it's never taking photos for the sake or making nice looking images. It's about the connection and purpose behind the image.

What does the creative community around you look like right now? Do you have any observations on what's going on?

The communities that I work with are always very uplifting and they all inspire me. Everyone's doing their own thing. It's very collaborative.

What was your experience like being a Maori creative in design school?

I think there were about 3 or 4 Maori students in our school cohort. I think the obvious thing was that your work was going to stand out because there weren't many Maori people in there. And being Maori in a cultural institution was my motivation to be as unapologetic as I could. It was different, especially coming from a town, and high school with a strong focus on...

Maori culture. There's unexpectedly quite a big culture shock. How approach everything from a Maori lens and begin to challenge the way different cultures understand influence and innovation?

Can you give me an example of what approaching these ethics through a Maori lens looked like?

Everything from making for extensions, the Tikanga Etiquette that showed up a space. Even grading process for Maori projects.

It sounds dry or not just technically. There's a sense of responsibility and loyalty to the subjects you are working on.

I'm so glad that Guilbarte came about. We were in the same hall and did the same course for weeks, we were in every single class together since year 10. I'm just super grateful that I had someone that could relate to, and someone that shared my values and background as me.

Do you think your experiences of being Maori and going through design school impacted your work?

What sort of tangible impacts has it had?

It didn't really impact my work directly but it did help me recognize my drive to learn more about my own culture and our practices, and it gave me the confidence to be able to question everything as a Maori student in a colonial institution. It made me want to go out and find more Maori spaces.

Bottom Left: Hamish Besley Creative Practice, Issue Two, 2021, Photography

Top Right: Hamish Besley Creative Practice, Issue Two, 2021, Photography

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Bottom Right: Hamish Besley Creative Practice, Issue Two, 2021, Photography

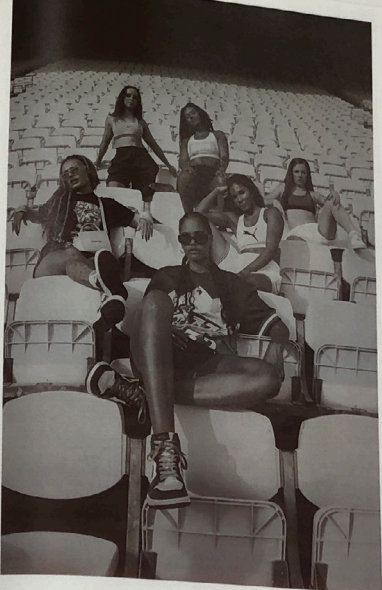


Figure 9. Promotional image used for Baggy Pants & Butter Paper, by Hamish Besley, 2021.

Reflecting on my time as a Translator, Performer and Director at the end of 2021 I wrote in my MFA thesis proposal:

Based on a book's needs, a designer can float within a spectrum starting at translator and ending as director, operating in the role required. I'm clear that I don't want to be an author but I am open to expanding to a similar role like designer as director. I wish to be in a space where I can design with others' work, acting as a director or performer, amplifying and filtering the content into a successful book that has a voice.

I became aware of the different stages within my design process and the definitions within Rock's *The Designer as Author* framework appeared to fit them perfectly. Rock's definitions seemed to offer an all-encompassing scale of how I could be involved in creating work. With a greater involvement in the process of making, the roles of Performer and Director appeared to offer a way towards graphic agency. By operating within this scale I built myself a safe space where things were categorised in a hierarchical structure. Whether executing mine or others' vision it still ended with me fitting content to contemporary conventions. Nothing brings me more joy than a harmonious grid and some beautifully set body text – I did not want to let go of that. In this space I could remain involved with the graphic composition while controlling the slow expansion of my influence on making.

SHIFT

Designer as Collaborator

With the conclusion of the first year of my MFA, I had a sure sense that Rock's roles were the answer to my research methods. However, with projects in which I would have once categorised my role as Translator or Performer, I began to understand these roles didn't really fit. Working on *The New Dream Book and Personal Journal* I was Designer as Collaborator. Instead of being a distant figure who indifferently applied the fundamental rules of book design to a text, I was actively involved in shaping the contents as well as the form.

The New Dream Book and Personal Journal is the memoir of Michael Curtis Forster. The book tells the story of Michael's life as the son of a bohemian screenwriting mother and well-known but absent film director for a father. Following his life from being a young boy escaping pre-WWII Germany to America, it documents the journey of coming of age in a new country and the unique life that followed. After each chapter is a section describing a dream of Michael's and his efforts to interpret it. Each dream is paired with a painting by his daughter Michelanne Forster.

At the beginning of the design process, Michelanne presented to me the manuscript written on a typewriter in the 1980s. Had I only been tasked with turning the printed manuscript into a refined printed document then I may have continued to work under the definition of Rocks roles. However, Michelanne wished to add paintings and family photographs. Together we worked to curate a list of paintings which she proposed to pair with each dream. In this role, I was not a passive formaliser for content to pass through on its way to digital formalisation like a Translator. Nor was I a Performer taking the script and finding its greatest form. There was no function of bigness either. Instead, we sat together and discussed how to fuse Michael's writing, Michelanne's paintings, and various family photographs into one cohesive book. Perhaps we were both Performers and co-directors, with Michelanne being a co-director, performer, writer and I being a co-director, performer, and set builder. Or, perhaps, the rigid

three-mode system as set out by Rock had exhausted its value and was no longer working. Maybe, there are infinite modes of working as a designer. I began to understand that to develop my practice I needed to find my own modes of working, my approach had to be adaptable and not restricted to the confines of predefined roles. Viewing the potential of my practice in these fixed roles was proving counterproductive as it restricted any innovation to my approach.

Perhaps it would have been worth reading Michael Rock's later writings. In 2013, Rock published *Fuck Content* as a response to what he saw as a persistence by some to read *The Designer as Author* not as a call to shift their perspective on content, but to generate it themselves – “While I am all for more authors, that was not quite the point I wanted to make” (p.92). Something that designer and writer Andrew Blauvelt (2010) had also picked up, looking back in 2012, was that even if they were not generating content, designers had interpreted Rock's work as calling them to become zealous in claiming partial authorship or ownership because they were the form givers. *Fuck Content* calls for designers not to dismiss the core of their profession: “we don't believe shaping is enough. So, to bring design out from under the thumb of content we must go one step further and observe that treatment is, in fact, a kind of text itself as complex and referential as a traditional understanding of content.” (Rock, 2013, p.93). It appeared that I was, like some of my forebears, falling into the trap of thinking that absolute control was key. However, just as Rock had reiterated in 2013, a closer relationship between form and content did not require me to create content from scratch or try and assert my dominance as form giver. *The New Dream Book and Personal Journal* had shown me that there was still another way I could evolve my methods of working. It just required a shift in perspective.

**THE NEW DREAM BOOK
AND PERSONAL JOURNAL**



MICHAEL CURTIS FORSTER

Figure 10. Cover of *The New Dream Book and Personal Journal*, by Michael Forster with Michelanne Forster and Hamish Besley, 2022.



Figure 11. Spreads from *The New Dream Book and Personal Journal*, by Michael Forster with Michelanne Forster and Hamish Besley, 2022.

Pushing Boundaries

There were horizons beyond the safety of Rock. I was ready to grow, evolve and mature. *Personal Journal and New Dream Book*, showed that the roles Rock presented were not the whole answer, but only a starting point. Conversations in my MFA cohort pointed towards other contemporary practices, highlighting, in particular, the fine line that sits between art and design. Something beautiful could happen when approaching design, in an artistic manner. Spending time on both sides of the classroom (as student and colleague) with artists-designers, Matthew Galloway, Catherine Griffiths, and Sarah Maxey has shown me what this dual practice looks like when established. All three trained in conventional design methodology. However, they have each wielded design as a tool for exploration into areas outside of graphic composition.

Galloway employs disciplines outside of design to widen the scope of his practice. *The Silver Bulletin*, a publication produced by Galloway combines art and design alongside his practice of writings, critique, journalism and curation. As a direct response to the Christchurch earthquakes and the disruption of community networks and discussion, *The Silver Bulletin* “acted as a kind of ‘stand in’ for these usual places of cultural exchange, that it would be a venue for writing, interviews, artist page-works, and other content that those in the arts community were still producing” (Galloway, n.d. para.2). Here Galloway was not using design for the sake of graphic composition but rather as a tool to facilitate community communication. Galloway employs disciplines outside of design such as historical research and installation art practices to widen the scope of his practice.

The Best Design Awards by Griffiths is a three poster series illustrating the glaring gender imbalance of the Designers Institute of New Zealand’s (DINZ) Best Design Awards. These posters impersonate the DINZ’s branding to create typographic infographics showing the overwhelming proportion of males receiving the Black Pin award and sitting on judging panels. Ensuring New Zealand designers remained conscious of “historic and real-time issues and concerns” (Griffiths, 2018. para.5), the blog Designers Speak (Up) was also established. Research and activism are just some of more tangible actions represented by Griffith’s poster series. There are also fewer tangibly

'design' activities like networking and outreach connected to this project to allow it to function.

Similarly, Maxey has used graphic composition for discussion of place and self. *Room for Doubt* is a series of 'uncommunicative' quotes derived from diversionary word games. Attempting the opposite of what most graphic outputs wish to achieve, these messages are deliberate and amusingly unclear, reserved or aloof (Maxey, 2020). From the perspective of an established career, Maxey combines design processes like typesetting and production with creative writing and poetry in her expanded practice.

Research and Destroy by Daniel van der Velden (2006/2009) explains that "an 'important graphic design' is one generated by the designer himself, a commentary in the margins of visual culture" (p.17). Producing work like this is rarely by means of the support of a benefactor. Mostly it is possible only by mobilising the resources at the designer's disposal. When this happens, the designer steps outside of client service transactions and instigates projects where they can create new roles for themselves. Modes of working are no longer determined by client needs, but they are determined by the designer claiming agency. What makes these precedents relevant, in part, is the removal of client expectation, allowing freedom to use graphic design to address issues and ask questions. They embody the effectiveness of using design for reasons outside of the client/designer relationship while still displaying prowess in typography conventions and formalisation process. Perhaps, I too can wield design as a tool for exploration. I realised that self-initiated projects could enable me to test new modes of working through experimental outputs.



Figure 12. *The Silver Bulletin*, by Matthew Galloway, 2012, (Reproduced by permission of Matthew Galloway).



Figure 13. *Room For Doubt*, by Sarah Maxey, 2020. (Reproduced by permission of Sarah Maxey)

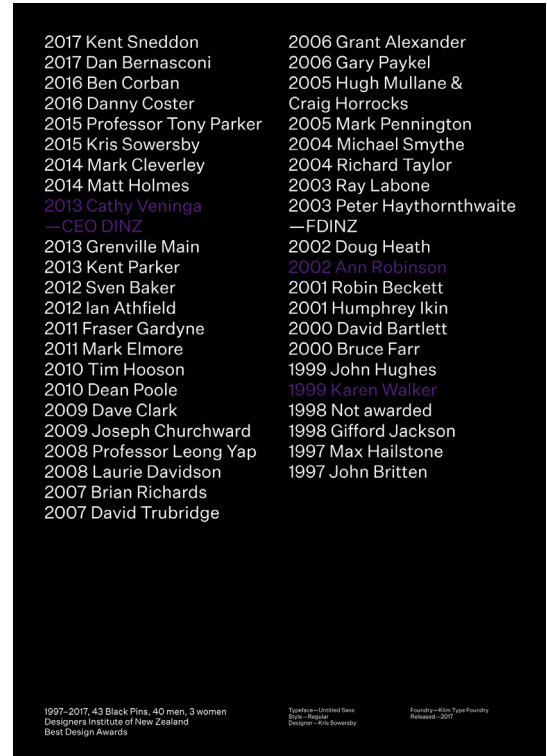


Figure 14 and Figure 15. *The Best Design Awards*, by Catherine Griffiths, 2018. (Reproduced here with permission from the Catherine Griffiths)

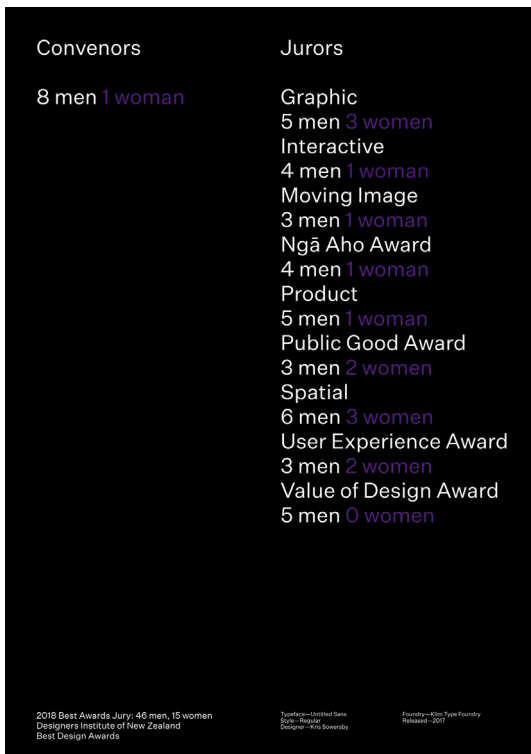


Figure 16. *The Best Design Awards*, by Catherine Griffiths, 2018. (Reproduced here with permission from the Catherine Griffiths)

EXPANSION

Expanding beyond Rock's selection of roles, I started to conceive projects that required me to work in unfamiliar ways. Explicitly prioritising the process in which a graphic output was generate. This period of expansion moved me away from just formalising content within the confines of graphic conventions. My interpretation of Rock's framework placed too much importance on the graphic output. In order to push my practice into new areas I had to let go of old expectations. Shifting from projects with clients and stakeholders to self-initiated experiments, I embraced process as composition and began to find new modes of making.

Designer as Catalyst

Seeing the promise in the uncomfortable position *Random_Comp* placed me in, I quickly followed it up with another project that engaged the graphic designer in a removed role.

MASS>COMP>UNKNOWN and *CONT.KNOWN COMP.UNKNOWN* are the results of the designer becoming a Catalyst. Replacing the random number generator with individuals, both of these projects assign the physical act of formalising content to five external subcontractors (sub-designers).

MASS>COMP>UNKNOWN consists of single page compositions created by the sub-designers combining random phrases with a selection of digital assets which were randomly selected from my computer. The brief asked for two submissions. Firstly, a one-page composition using nothing but the resources provided. Secondly, a composition that followed the same rules except using resources from the sub-designer's computer, rather than ones provided. Outside of these parameters, everything was left to the sub-designers' judgment. *CONT.KNOWN COMP.UNKNOWN* followed a similar creation process. Except, instead of text taken from randomphrases-dotcom each designer received one page from the play *Ka Mau, Ka Muri* by Jacob Banks.

As Designer as Catalyst, I assumed a role similar to a client, delivering my business (text and assets) to the service provider (designer) with a brief. Armed with resources, the designer returned with a brand identity (composition). Commonly the benefactors of design, clients often employ the services of a designer to take their provocation and repackage it – formalising it. However, unlike a client I did not harbour expectations. There was no dialogue other than the brief. This interaction was as Australian graphic designer Mark Gowing (2017) called the perfect client/designer relationship – a “call and response”. Both actors keep to their fields of knowledge. Usually with client as problem finder and designer as problem solver. Until becoming a Catalyst I had only practiced on the side of the response. Suddenly, I was the call. My usual concerns like: ‘Do these fonts match? How wide do I need my margins?’ turned into ‘How would they read the provocation? Would they understand the content?’ Becoming Designer as Catalyst was to assign the actions I was comfortable with to external sub-designs and to concern myself with new areas of the design process.

At the time I disliked swapping typesetting for writing. It leaned too close to the actions of an author. My artist-designer precedents had displayed the effect that comes for conceptualising an entire project, not just content. Becoming a Catalyst had isolated me from the actions I enjoyed - formalisation and execution. Similar to Rocks *Fuck Content* I formed the conclusion that going forward I wanted to remain involved with the actual making. My practice didn’t need any more writers.



Figure 18. Submission by Callum Brookland for MASS>COMP>UNKNOWN, by Hamish Besley, 2022.

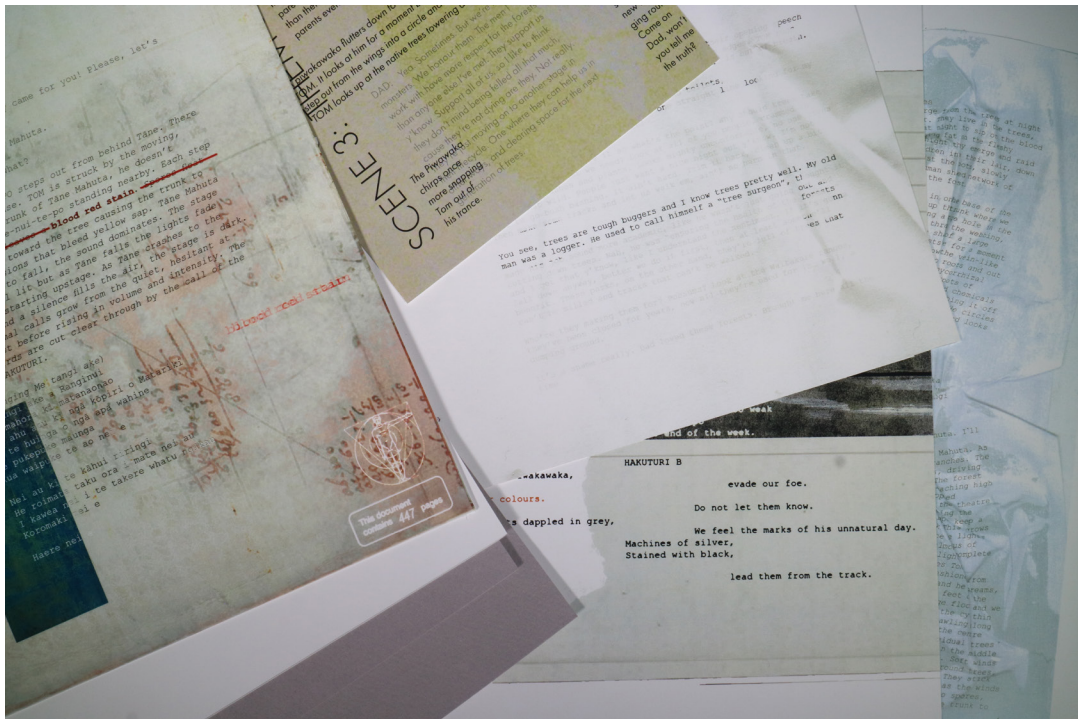
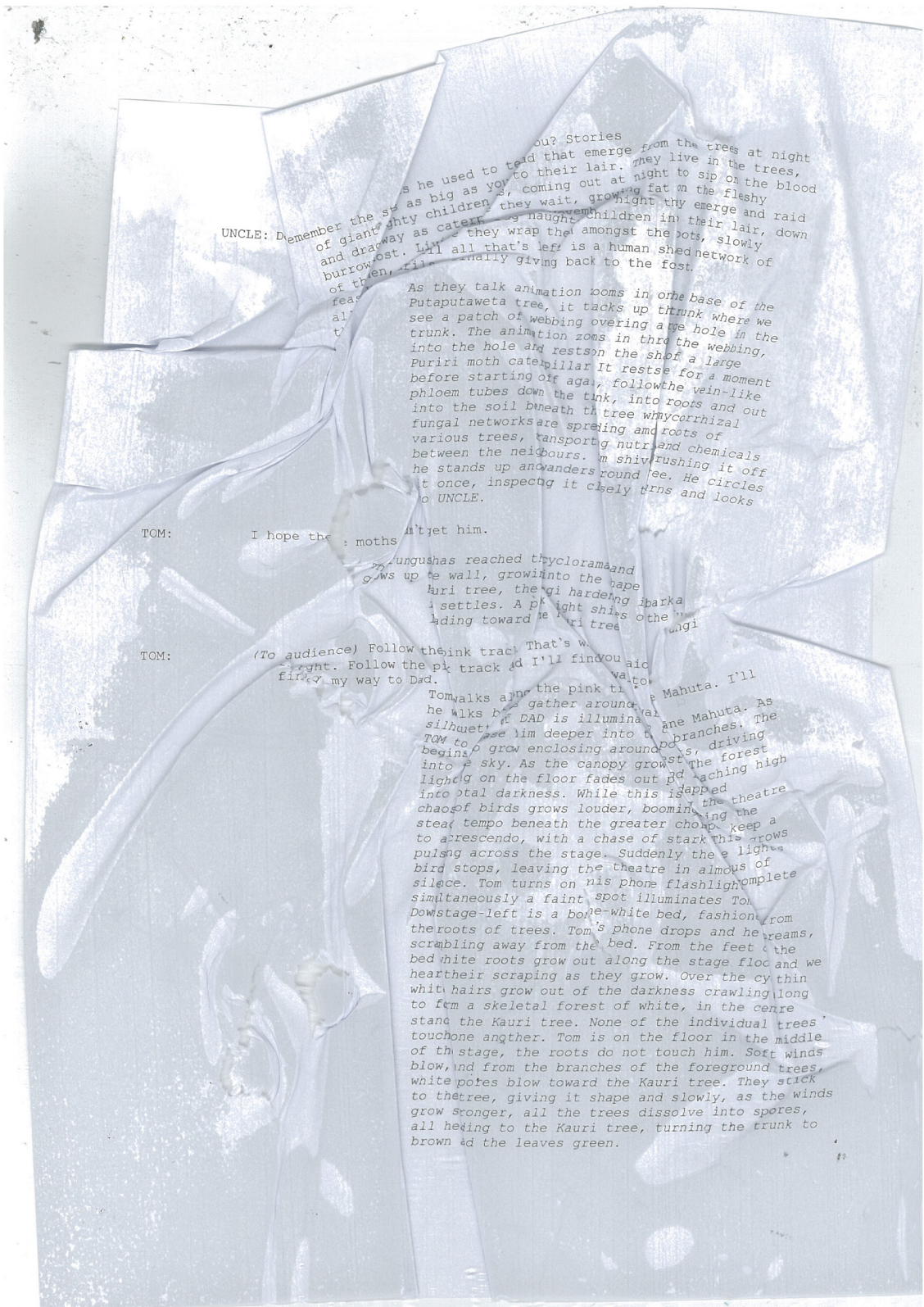


Figure 19. Submissions by Callum Brookland, Caleb Delany, Louis Mackessack, Henry Mabin, Hamish Wilson, for CONT.KNOWN COMP.UNKNOWN, by Jacob Banks and Hamish Besley, 2022.



...ou? Stories
 ...s he used to tead that emerge from the trees at night
 of giant shy children, they live in the trees,
 and drag way as caterpillars, coming out at night to sip on the blood
 burrow. Lill all that's left is a human shed network of
 of the... they wrap that amongst the pots, slowly
 fea... giving back to the forest.

As they talk animation zooms in on the base of the
 Putaputaweta tree, it tucks up th trunk where we
 see a patch of webbing overing a eye hole in the
 trunk. The animation zooms in thrd the webbing,
 into the hole and rests on the shof a large
 Puriri moth caterpillar. It rests for a moment
 before starting off again, follow the vein-like
 phloem tubes down the tunk, into roots and out
 into the soil beneath th tree whycorrhizal
 fungal networks are spreing amnd roots of
 various trees, transporting nutriand chemicals
 between the neighbours. m shiv rushing it off
 he stands up and wanders round see. He circles
 it once, inspectg it closely trns and looks
 to UNCLE.

TOM: I hope the : moths at get him.

...ungus has reached thyclorama and
 gws up te wall, grow into the bape
 huri tree, the gi hardelng iparka
 i settles. A pk ight shiss othe
 hding toward he Puri tree ...ngi

TOM: (To audience) Follow the ink track. That's w
 ...ght. Follow the pk track ad I'll find ou aid
 firk my way to Dad.

Tom walks along the pink ti e Mahuta. I'll
 he wks bes gather around, ai
 silhouette of DAD is illumina e Mahuta. As
 TOM se lim deeper into a branches. The
 begin to grow enclosing around os, driving
 into e sky. As the canopy grows t the forest
 lightg on the floor fades out gd achng high
 into otal darkness. While this is dapped
 chaos of birds grows louder, boomin ing the
 stea tempo beneath the greater choop keep a
 to arescendo, with a chase of stark This rows
 pulsng across the stage. Suddenly the e ligh
 bird stops, leaving the theatre in almous of
 silace. Tom turns on his phone flashligh complete
 simultaneously a faint spot illuminates Tom
 Dowstage-left is a bone-white bed, fashion from
 the roots of trees. Tom's phone drops and he reams,
 scrambling away from the bed. From the feet e the
 bed white roots grow out along the stage floo and we
 hear their scraping as they grow. Over the cy thin
 whit hairs grow out of the darkness crawling long
 to fcm a skeletal forest of white, in the centre
 stand the Kauri tree. None of the individual trees
 touch one another. Tom is on the floor in the middle
 of th stage, the roots do not touch him. Soft winds
 blow, nd from the branches of the foreground trees,
 white ptes blow toward the Kauri tree. They stick
 to the tree, giving it shape and slowly, as the winds
 grow stronger, all the trees dissolve into spores,
 all heding to the Kauri tree, turning the trunk to
 brown ad the leaves green.

Figure 20. Submissions by Caleb Delany for CONT.KNOWN COMP.UNKNOWN, by Jacob Banks and Hamish Besley, 2022.

Designer as Mediator

Designer as Catalyst and Bystander had been successful in making me explore unfamiliar modes of working within graphic design. However, they also removed me from influence over the final graphic output. I needed to find a space where I could explore new modes of working without losing sight of the core concern in graphic design – visual formalisation. *OCTOBER OFFENSIVE* introduced me to Designer as Mediator. The result being a 1500x3000mm poster composed of the play *October Offensive* by Jacob Banks. Just like *Random_comp* each line of the play was assigned a unique number before being placed in a colour, font and position. However, instead of choosing from my entire library of fonts and colors, I provided a curated list. The final poster was a composition defined by a random number generator operating within perspectives limits. Ensuring that it could still be understood by external audiences the poster was paired with a small booklet including the title of the show, author, blurb, and the calculations that were used to generate the composition.

Without instructions from the original author, I was not executing any authorial vision, nor was I embellishing or amplifying the content. The random number generator (RNG) took a lead role while mine was secondary. In the role of Designer as Mediator, I supervised the RNGs interaction with the content and guided its outcome. Between us we maintained a restricted collaborative workflow. To invoke my theatre metaphor, I set the stage (page), brought in the producer (random number generator) and asked it to put on a particular show (the script). I then left it to these digital tools to discern the final performance. On opening night, I put out the posters and handed out the programs (supplementary booklet). Someone is Starting to Bloom and Random Comp had been created in a similar manner. However, both served distinctive purposes. Instead of being the embodiment of an artist's practice or a thought experiment, *OCTOBER OFFENSIVE* was pushing me out of my normal roles. I was not leaving out all consideration for the final output but I was prioritising its means of making.

Interestingly, the comments made about *OCTOBER OFFENSIVE* at a studio visit were positive. Guests drew similarities between the

chaotic layering of discourse and the confused communication of a chaotic battlefield (where the original play is set). There were also the analogies of the single page referring to a stage where a whole story takes place. Despite leaving aesthetic control behind in favour of process, this new approach seemingly still offered something to the dissemination of content. This was working proof that going to extremes still meant you could discover useful things. It was important to remember that when focusing on process as composition that the output had to link back to this in some way. Graphic design's core purpose is the organising of information into easily digestible form. By relinquishing too much control in *Bystander* and *Catalyst* I had discovered new ways of working but lost touch with the basics of graphic design.

I began to regret dismissing Ellen Lupton's (1998) *The Designer as Producer* earlier in my research. Referencing the Marxist writings of German critic Walter Benjamin's *Author as Producer*, Lupton drew parallels to Benjamin's belief that the method of creation should be under the writer's control. Her argument was that by becoming masters of new technology, designers could become greater amplifiers of meaning whilst also making the public better at engaging and responding. Authorship and its roles in content creation is predominantly an activity of the mind, while design is an activity of the hand. Lupton had advocated for a more holistic approach to design where the lines between roles and modes are embraced, rather than reinforced. Bringing these two facilities together allows for a final result that loses nothing between idea and execution. The benefits to the 'reading public', also benefits me – the 'designing private' because a better outcome is most likely one where I have been able to design every element. Likewise, a composition that focuses solely on method of creation can end up with similar issues for the designer as I had found with *CONT.KNOWN COMP.UNKNOWN*. I concluded that leaning too far in either direction would disrupt the subtle balance graphic design manages between form and content. Designer as a *Catalyst* and *Mediator* had sacrificed my consideration for content in favour of process/production. To avoid losing sight of what I enjoyed about graphic design I needed to re-engage with content.



Figure 21. *OCTOBER OFFENSIVE*, by Jacob Banks and Hamish Besley, 2022.



Figure 22. Author selfie with *OCTOBER OFFENSIVE*, by Hamish Besley, 2022.

Designer as Parasite

Reconnecting myself with a conscious interaction with content I was aware that honoring content had been the goal of Designer as Translator and Performer. In order to avoid repeating old modes of working I adapted the process and became Designer as Parasite. Reliant on the information within to create an experimental poetry book, *POEMS* contains thirteen different formless clusters randomly generated by an algorithm interpreting and remodeling their typographic data. These individual forms appear on a page alone, while the poem of origin peeks through French-folded pages. Taking the numerical value of line length, longest line, shortest line, average line length, and word count, I plotted these properties into a custom script built with the rendering engine Grasshopper. This software then used the poems typographic values to control the position, size, density, and amount of round forms and render them into 'Meta-balls'. As each data set is entered the varying typographic information changes the properties of the 'Meta-balls', generating new forms.

Catalyst and Mediator had pulled me further away from the treatment of content. *POEMS* did the opposite by making me a Parasite reliant on the content to create a specific graphic composition. As Parasite, I attached my body (rendering software) to the host (poems). Through a process (the script), I drain the host of resources (typographic data), growing my own form. The forms have little to do with the text visually, yet their physical properties are direct results of the typographic information. My 'contribution' is not to execute the original authors vision, nor to give it voice; instead the poets text gives physical form to the process I enforced upon it.

Actions that give content physical form and allow it to be public facing are at the core of both graphic design and publishing. Intrinsic to these actions is the idea of filtering and amplification; filtering in the traditional sense of gate-keeping and amplification as actions that lead to increased distribution and consumption of content (Gilbert, 2016). My processes bring the original poems out into the world, but do not amplify or filter in favor of the original content. They do not honor the text by protecting its meaning either. With difficulty one can relate the changing form to the typography data by using the guide bound to the back of the book. No relation exists between

the poem's original narrative and the meta-ball forms. By muffling the voice of the original poems, I let the meta-balls take control. With growing confidence to play and leave behind prior conventions I had successfully created a work where I engaged with content but didn't fall under its control. In *POEMS* content honors form.

POEMS arguably abstracts the final graphic output too far for the audience, but that's the point. My adherence to Rock's roles proved that little would be gained by sticking within a rigid system. I had to be careful not to do something similar when moving beyond them. Designing as a Parasite solidified what 'Catalyst' and 'Mediator' had alluded to. I was an active, lively participant in the design process. I was capable of digesting content and through either direct action or a convoluted process, transforming it. I find confidence in this. Just as great leaders don't want to be surrounded by 'yes men', future collaborators don't want a passive graphic designer.

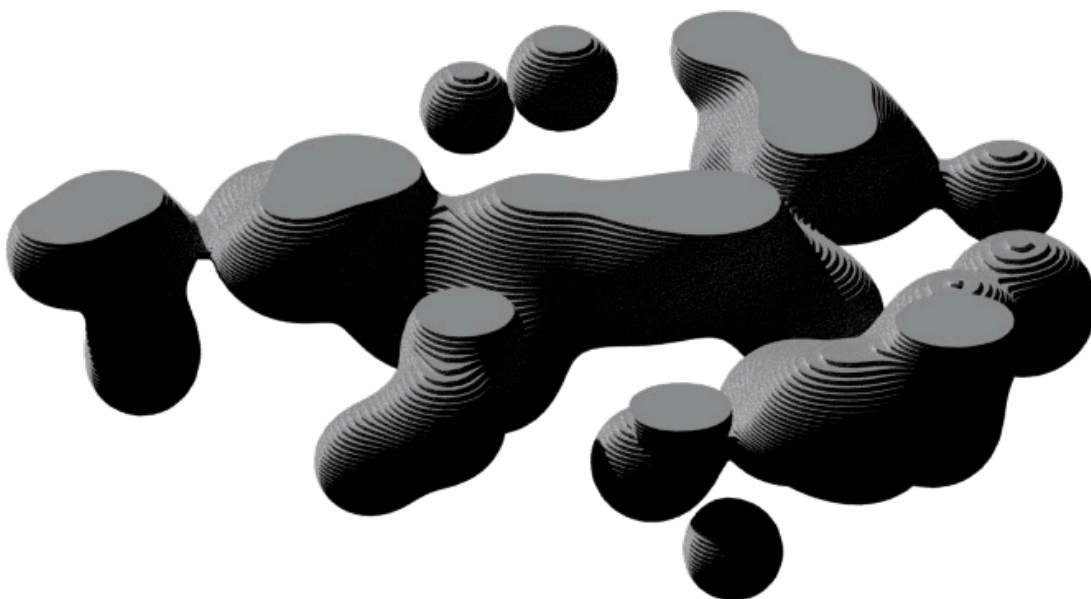


Figure 23. *Meta-Ball form from POEMS*, by Jacob Banks and Hamish Besley, 2022.

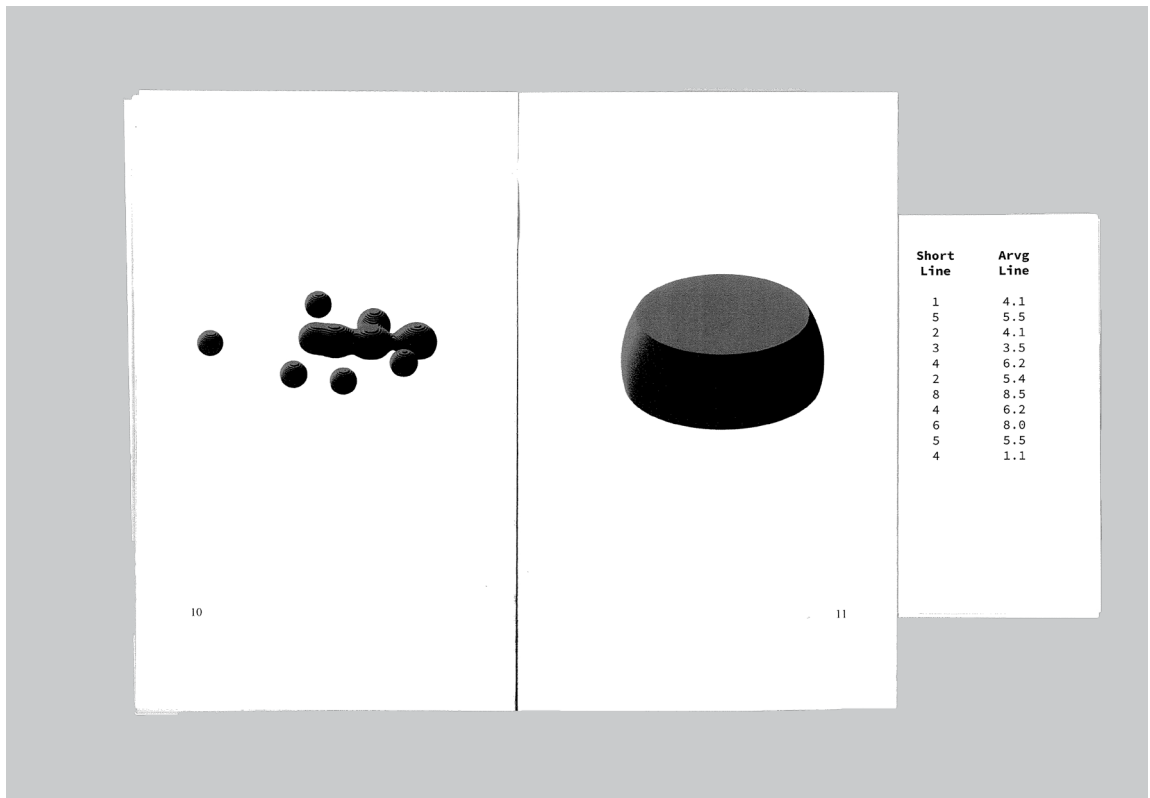


Figure 24. *Double spread from POEMS*, by Jacob Banks and Hamish Besley, 2022.

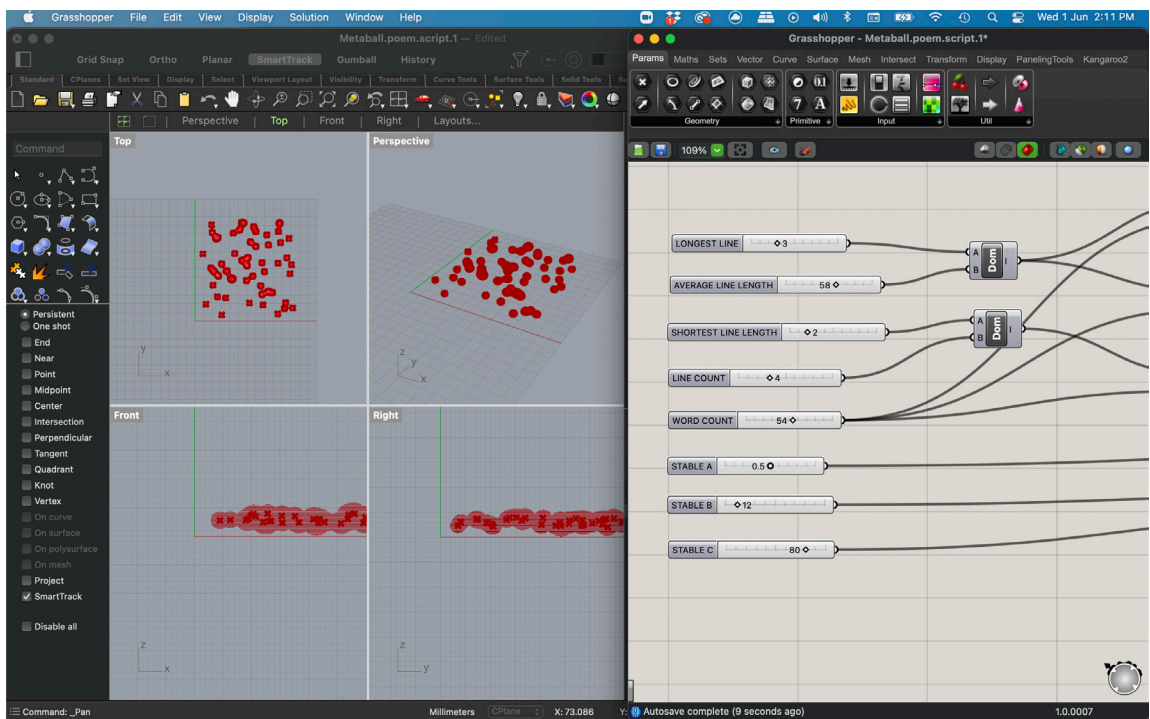


Figure 25. Screenshot of *Grasshopper* interface used to create *POEMS*, by Jacob Banks and Hamish Besley, 2022.



Figure 26. *PO3MS*, by Jacob Banks and Hamish Besley, 2022.

My period of expansion demonstrated that I could engage modes of working that either separated themselves from the content, or were heavily reliant on it. Rather than only being the physical form that brought design techniques into the creation of a work, as an active participant I could move between roles using design as a tool where necessary.

POEMS was the precipice of this research. As a Parasite reshaping content so heavily the unavoidable was taking place. Despite stating in my MFA proposal back in 2021 “I’m clear that I don’t want to be an author” my work began to take on notions of authorship. Mirroring the evolution of the design authorship debate in my own practice, this development brought me in line with contemporary practices. In his essay *Tool (Or, Post-production for the Graphic Designer)* Andrew Blauvelt (2011) noted that today’s designers were a new generation who “produce now and ask questions later” (p.26). The old world of design was concerned with the technical craft of reproduction, paste ups and typesetting. Now, with production so easily obtained, designers could focus their attention on other activities. Utilising randomness along with found and contributed content. Previously, I had kept my notions of authorship at bay. Because *POEMS* output was such a dramatic repackaging of the original content I had no choice but to submit to the title of co-author.

At first glance this claim of authorship flies in the face of the theories of Rock and Lupton which I have closely aligned myself with. However, as Rock (2013) stated in *Fuck Content* “Our content is perpetually design itself” (p.95). My addition to the existing content was not more writing, but something like graphic authorship in a strictly visual sense. My contribution as co-author of *POEMS* was ‘reinterpreted’ graphic design. Suddenly my practice had now touched all general stages of the graphic design process. I had moved from static formaliser, to active participant, and now I am creator. This was the key in my search for engaging with graphic design with greater agency. I had to get comfortable with the fluid ways of working that a contemporary graphic designer needed to have. I was discovering agency by testing my practice’s relationship with content.

ABSTRACTION

Designer as Content

With the discovery that I could approach the thin line of authorial graphic formalisation without becoming a writer I was elated. By designing new processes I had slowly built up my agency to the level of co-authorship. However, I wanted to keep pushing my level of involvement. The works *Codex* and *Dataset* use the designer and their artifacts as content. The composition – design – as a physical act becomes the basis composition. Intangible metrics and artefacts generated in the pursuit of graphic composition are given form to create the Designer as Content.

Codex presents the reader with a conventionally printed and bound volume. However, the original graphic composition has been translated from image into text by the HTML coding language. This is achieved by laying out the original poetry in a conventional graphic composition and then using open source software to translate its formatting information into the text inputs used for HTML. Phrases like `<p>` (paragraph), `` (emphasised text), and `<style>` (visual parameters) become both literal and metaphorical representations of the designer's labour.

Dataset goes one step further by removing all traces of the external content in favour of representing the designer's physical activities as raw data. Using open-source software mouse movements and keystrokes are recorded and then visualised. For mouse activity this appears as a continuous line tracing movement across the page. Circles of various sizes show where the mouse has rested. Keyboard displays a list of keys pressed. Both are literal manifestations of the physical movements undergone in the making of a graphic composition.

Codex and *Dataset* are far from beautiful graphic images. But, they represent a practice based summary of my research. In a full circle moment these projects place me, the graphic design, at every stage of production. I am the author, formaliser, publisher and content. These two works don't make me any better at laying out a page,



Figure 28. Pages from Codex, by Jacob Banks and Hamish Besley, 2022.

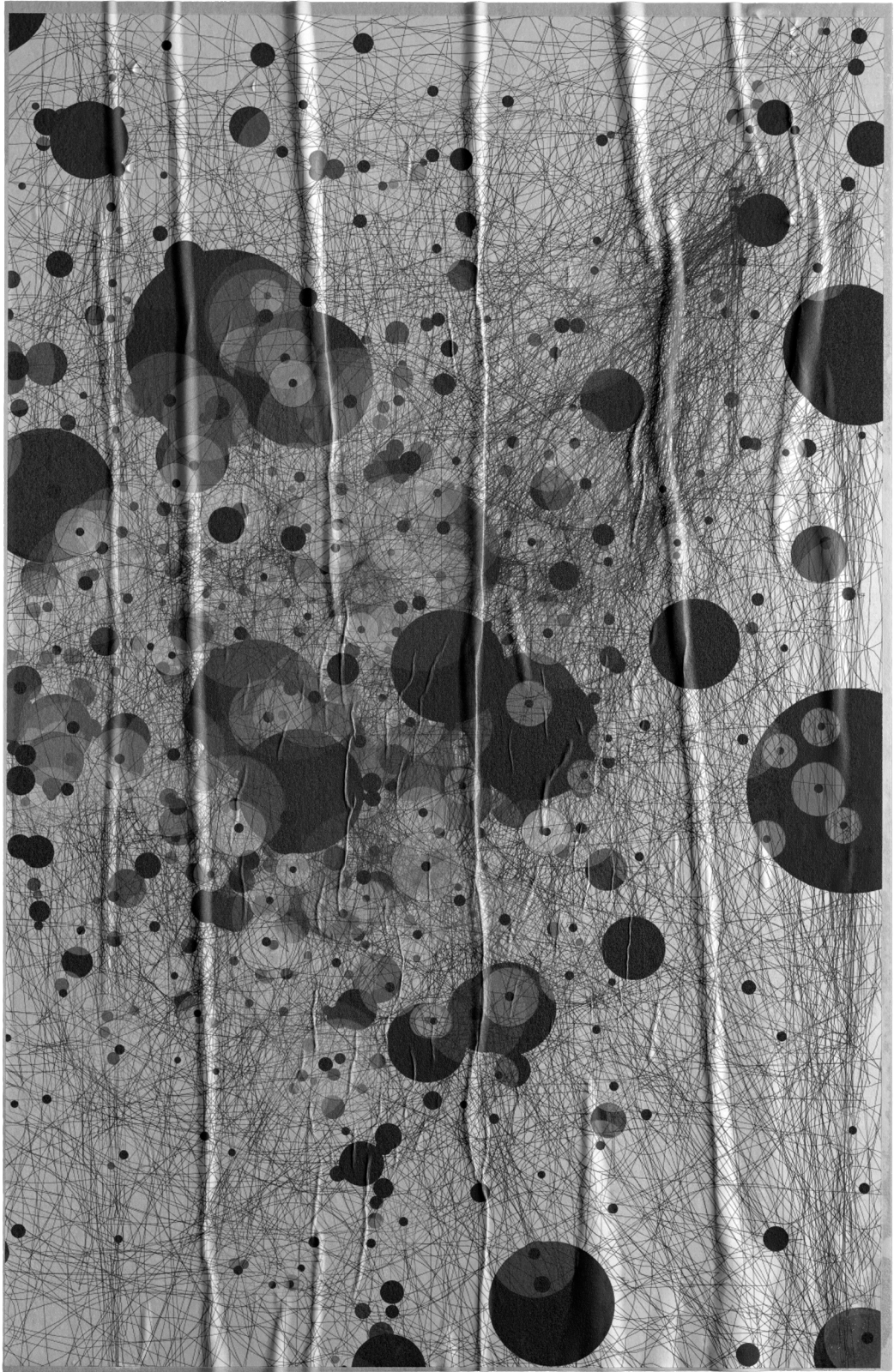


Figure 29. *Dataset - Mouse*, by Hamish Besley, 2022. (Using IOGraph)

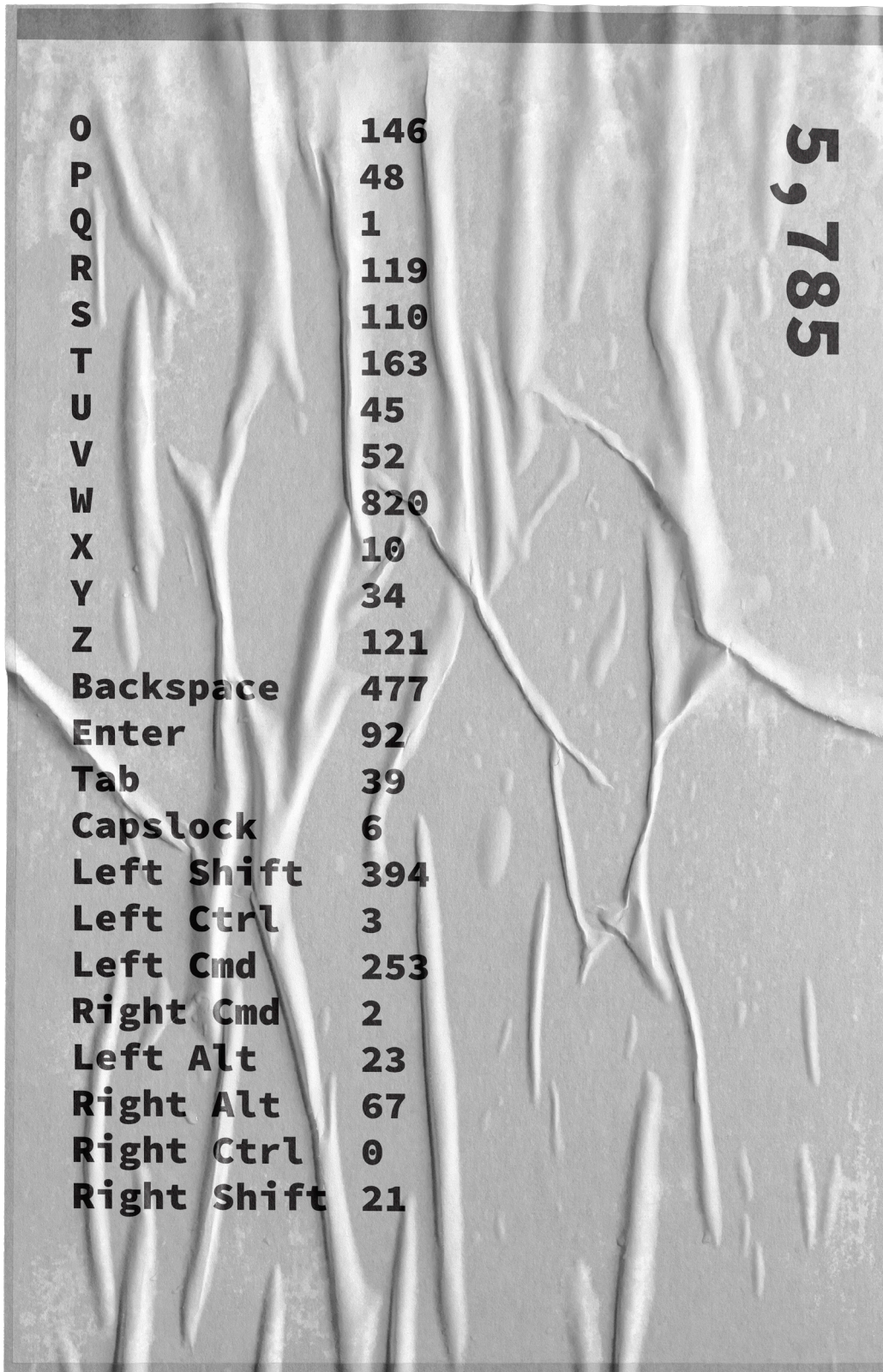


Figure 30. *Dataset - Keyboard*, by Hamish Besley, 2022. (Using WhatPulse software)

CONCLUSION

There will be times when projects require the graphic designer to be a Translator. *Painting from the Holocaust's Barbaric Periphery — a Personal Journey* demonstrates the benefits of this comprehension. It embraced the content, requiring only a humble graphic formalisation to get the authors ideas across. However, as a designer emerging into a world where the democratisation of production has blurred the lines between once isolated professions there needs to be flexibility and strength in my practice. To achieve this, I needed to leave behind the safety of convention. I have spent the last two years building towards an understanding of what graphic agency looks like. Taking notes along the way, I have embraced others visions, perverted content and also explored the middle ground where I have actively attempted to incorporate new processes order to amplify content.

In a world where the designer can be author, performer, activist, producer, and more, my effectiveness hinges on having the flexibility to move fluidly between these graphic extremes. To realise this, I needed to use design to critique my own practice. I needed to explore methods of working that either listened, ignored, and harmonised with my existing skill-set. Although it may appeal to one seeking logical categorisation, adhering to fixed definitions of operation like Rock's *The Designer as Author* framework creates a rigidity that limits growth.

When beginning this masters degree I had expected to leave having answered all the questions I had brought in with me. After two years I am leaving with some answers, but with many more questions. What would it look like if I submitted fully to notions of graphic authorship? What external problems do I now apply my new and improved practice to? In some ways I hold disdain for myself that none of my outputs reached the level of craft and impact that say, Galloways *The Silver Bulletin* demonstrated. I remind myself that those things will come now that I have the ability to look at graphic design critically and as a tool. Knowing who you are and what you're making are just as important as choosing a font and grid. Just as they

had for the contemporary design field, the debates of design authorship have formed a foundation for my practice to build upon. Now armed with an understanding of how I can expand my graphic design practice beyond the organising of visual content, I carry confidence knowing that I am more than a passive intermediary between client and composition. Today I can form a way of working depending on the requirement of the author, client or problem. I have agency as a graphic designer.

To further complicate things, in the space of authorship, for us designers, with the proliferation of A.I powered rendering software like Dall-e and Midjourney, our role in the world is once again in question. Why would one pay an individual to create a logo or illustration that they can now get, with unlimited revisions, from the comfort of their computer? Similar questions were raised with the release of the personal computer. In response, design was forced to critique itself and evolve as a profession. Is another great upheaval coming? Building a practice in the aftermath of the Designer as Author debate, I have benefited greatly from access to production and freedom to be multifaceted. By revisiting this history I am now aware of the potential of my practice. Unlike A.I systems my approach is organic, fluid and interchangeable. Whatever the future holds, I know that I offer more to graphic design than just an ability to follow instruction. No longer tied to the pursuit of graphic convention I can adapt and go my own way. As I look to my next step I wonder what it would look like to be a:

Designer as... Thief

Designer as... Magpie

Designer as... Fool

Designer as... Success

Designer as... Failure

Designer as... Metaphor

Designer as... Guest

Designer as... Rival

Designer as... Infected

Designer as... Guardian

Designer as... Destroyer

Designer as... Pilgrim

Designer as... Musicist
Designer as... Heretic
Designer as... Ambassador
Designer as... Dictator
Designer as... Statue
Designer as... Essence
Designer as... Liar
Designer as... Agent
Designer as... Operative
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Designer as... Consumer
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Designer as... Stoic

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