

# DEAD ANIMALS

CONSIDERATIONS TOWARD  
AN EXPANDED PRACTICE IN DESIGN

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When I was seventeen, I hit a rabbit with my truck. I was a good driver — my stepfather had made me a junior expert at counter-steering out of black ice skids on dark, county roads. He also made sure that the dangers of swerving for wildlife were deeply etched on my impressionable young psyche. “It’s us or them,” he had said, pointing to the deer-sized crater on the front of his van, clots of fur and blood jammed into the plastic seams of one headlight. He swept the back of his hand down his own body with a vaudevillian bow, exhibiting his intactness in contrast to the deer’s certain end.

It was Summer now and the long, straight roads of southern Wisconsin were spackled with roadkill. I saw the little bunny leap from the knee-high cornfield, but my stepfather’s training had taken and I was unswerving.

Thu-thump. I made a U-turn, pulled over onto the gravel shoulder, and got out to examine the little rabbit. The impact had knocked the animal out of its skin and the entrails out of the animal. The whole assembly was nearly five feet of glistening red muscle and tiny organs. I picked it up by its warm foot, the only place the skin was still attached, dragged it off the road, and studied the sudden lesson in mortality.

This memory has visited and revisited me lately, sometimes accompanied by a suite of other creatures whose deaths I have directly caused. The list includes one toad, one frog, a mole, at least four squirrels, dozens of mice, twenty English sparrows, and about a hundred fish, which suggests perhaps five-hundred nightcrawlers, minnows, and grasshoppers twitching on the ends of fishhooks. There are insects, too — swatted, poisoned, stomped on, or crushed on my windshield. I am left wondering why these memories have

surfaced and what I might do with them.

It is the *why* itch that fuels my work as a designer. One might say it's the *why* that fuels the life of any curious person. It is my role as a designer, however, that suggests the tools I use for this exploration and the form of what it might lead to. In other words: the means and the ends. Like many designers, I engage in other processes of making, as well — predominantly drawing and writing, in my case. The intertwining of these practices represents a locus of much discussion in the realm of design education today. I would like to explore the shape of this discussion as it is understood through the terms of means and ends. By appointing specific ambassadorial practices from fine arts and liberal arts educational models — process drawing and essay writing, respectively — I propose a perforation of the boundaries between these domains. In doing so, my goal is not necessarily to reform education. Nor is it to create a new definition of design. Instead, it is to help identify practices that might nurture the interdisciplinary mode so many people are talking about, a mode that lends itself to self-generated inquiry, into using an expanded practice of design as a method to push ideas forward through thinking, making, and writing.

## THE GREAT DEBATE

There exists a widespread argument, often imbued with near-hostile vehemence, that there is no place for personal expression in design.

The corollary for those maintaining this argument is that self-expression belongs in the field of art. The proponents' primary concern seems to be that a client's message is in danger of being subordinated by the designer's own voice or personal agenda. This model favors the position of designer as translator or facilitator, and represents a broad swath of design practitioners and educators.

In the student newsletter of the AIGA (American Institute for Graphic Arts), a seasoned professional offers a list of tips for students on getting the most out of their education:

Stop trying to be an artist. This is about communication, not self-expression. If you want to make art, go down the hall and change majors.<sup>1</sup>

This argument is a critique of ends, not means. Here, "communication"

and "self-expression" refer to outcome. They do not describe how we get there. This betrays a bias about the function of design that begins with education and pervades to the public's notion of what graphic design is. Or perhaps it begins with design's public role and education follows. The bias is largely founded on the results of the design process, that is, not the process at all, but the product. In the case of design education, the product is a designer. Gunnar Swanson, a designer, writer, and educator, characterizes graphic design education not as education but as vocational training, even in the university setting.

Philosophy teachers do not measure their success based on whether the majority of their students become philosophers. Likewise, the goal in literature is not only to create producers of literature or literary critics, but to create literate people. By contrast, ask teachers of graphic design about students who don't make careers in design or a related field. Most often, those students are seen as failures. There is little

feeling that graphic design has prepared the student for life or a career other than design.<sup>2</sup>

That is, design education is an education of ends. Process, of course, is vital, but it is evaluated based on the artifacts that come out of it, rather than the metamorphosis of ideas or a change within the designer—perhaps as *evidenced* in the artifacts at hand or those that follow.

Both liberal arts and fine arts education prepare the student firstly for a life of inquiry. Fine arts does so largely through visual exploration, while liberal arts places an emphasis on synthesis through writing. The debate about design education's relationship to each of these disciplines has been vigorous, framing one aspect of a larger effort to name and identify the shape of the field. The past ten years have seen the role of the designer described in relation to other disciplines in a laundry list of "designer as ..." models. They include: designer as producer (Ellen Lupton<sup>3</sup>; Victor Margolin<sup>4</sup>); designer as programmer (Karl Gerstner<sup>5</sup>); designer as author (Michael Rock<sup>6</sup>); designer as editor (Michael Beirut<sup>7</sup>); designer as auteur (Adriano Pedrosa<sup>8</sup>); designer as executor, agent, and

provocateur (William Drenttel<sup>9</sup>); and Steven Heller's practical hybrid, designer as authorpreneur<sup>10</sup>.

This plethora of identities reveals the interrelationships that design shares across a spectrum of thinking and making, in both visual and verbal realms. If there is a unifying thrust behind the debate, it is that designers are more than technicians and prettifiers, that we think through making. The "designer as ..." models have been instrumental in suggesting this expanded role. They share in describing the designer's role through process, through means. At the same time, however, they reveal something of an identity crisis. The very structuring of the arguments, which place the designer in the role of someone or something else with the word "as," reinforces the subjugation they attempt to overcome. Ultimately, I should hope that the expanded functions would be folded into the discipline itself — designer as designer.

A recent discussion on the collective weblog, "Design Observer," reveals a cross section of the art/design debate. Criticizing an essay by Edward Gomez that considers turn-of-the-century schizophrenic artist Adolf Wölfli as a graphic designer, William Drenttel writes:

Graphic designers should worry when “design” becomes the new catchall phrase, an easy description for all artistic endeavors. If we want the words graphic design to mean anything, we should challenge their loose application to everything and everyone. <sup>11</sup>

Though Drenttel is a vocal supporter of interdisciplinary practice, rooted in research, his comment reveals a perceived vulnerability of the design field’s identity, suggesting that we must defend against those who attempt to breach or extend the boundaries of what we believe our domain to be.

Rick Poynor replies by suggesting the argument for a limited definition is only in the interest of designers trying to preserve a “professional position,” but that perhaps this definition acknowledges neither the benefits of removing that limitation, nor the simple fact of what visual culture is today:

[Insisting on a functional definition] puts an artificial limit on visual expression and it fails to reflect the

reality of visual practice across the board as it routinely occurs now the world over. In fact the hybrid, definition-flouting character of so much contemporary visual work, coming from whatever direction, is such an established phenomenon that it’s amazing that we still attempt to reinforce the old definitions.<sup>11</sup>

Poynor adds that for most of the history of Western art, works were made on commission, for a client. Yet a Titian painting, for example, is undeniably infused with the personal expression of the artist while addressing more universal themes. The notion of art as the domain of self-expression, Poynor asserts, is only a product of the modern period.

Another thread in the argument spurred by Drenttel’s essay contests the inclusion of one of Paula Scher’s paintings in the Cooper-Hewitt Design Triennial. In response, Drenttel comments:

Paula Scher is a graphic designer who chooses to

paint works deeply informed by her graphic design. I think she is an artist. I think she is a graphic designer. Where she belongs on this spectrum is between Paula and history.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to add that Scher's graphic design is equally informed by her paintings, and that the division of identities — that she is an artist when she paints and a designer when she doesn't — is counterproductive in the campaign for interdisciplinary practice.

The original comment that “this is about communication, not self-expression,” positions those two ends in opposition. Part of this misconception may derive from a proliferation of the formal qualities that stand for self-expression, but do not reflect its substance. Again, where the designer is attending to a client, an application of personal style that is not in harmony with the project is appropriately criticized. But to erect a wall between communication and self-expression, and to align these motivations with design and art respectively, is careless.

A more useful critique might be: design that fails to leverage greater

meaning out of the seeds of self-expression often isn't interesting. Perhaps the same can be said for writing or art. The trick, then, becomes drawing the universal out of the anecdotal, finding common ground in personal experience.

### **A LIMITED PALETTE**

The personal essay cannot help but nurture germs of ideas. We can begin with something small, personal, something we are curious about (why are these memories of dead animals visiting me?) and subject the question to reflection through the rigors of grammar and form to crack open the significance. With her deceptively casual wisdom, Joan Didion writes, “I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear ... *What is going on in these pictures in my mind?*”<sup>12</sup> As a research tool, the essay demands a certain kind of accountability. It demands a position, something not always asked of a designer — something, in fact, the “designer as translator” camp insists be set aside.

Designer Gail Swanlund offers permission to liberate the position of

the essayist from straight truth. She asserts that through fiction, a practice she suggests we are constantly engaged in through the way we dress, talk, walk, a writer is relieved of the requirement of being an authority and therefore free to embellish. She talks of the interplay between writing and design in her own practice as a generative process:

[Writing and visual form-making] have a different kind of preciousness — different blood and blood type and muscle. Combining them creates this new creature, this new moment between them that I might not have arrived at if I had just been working in visual form.<sup>13</sup>

With Gail's permission, I return to my dead animals.

By simply committing the list to paper, I become aware that I can think of no deaths since I moved to the city six years ago. The squirrels were killed in Maine — four within as many months when I lived on the curviest road in Sagadahoc County — beautiful, fuzzy little gray squirrels darting into my Toyota's tires with sudden changes of squirrel mind. In my rented house on the same road, clapping traps deleted little mouse lives. Each morning, before cereal, I would pad onto the concrete floor of the garage and gather the traps with the confused queasiness of a mouse-loving trapper.

The sparrows, too, were trapped — in a wicker live trap, from which they were then removed and fed to my childhood pet, Wilt the snake. There's a picture of me kneeling in the grass at the community pet show holding Wilt in one hand, four feet of sparrow-fed reptile, and a blue ribbon in the

other. Wilt died of natural causes the following year.

What haunts me, though, is the frog. I was quite ill, having arrived in Hong Kong two days prior with an undiagnosed tropical malady. Itchy, feverish, and dehydrated, I awoke in the middle of the night and shuffled into the kitchen. Before me was a cockroach of truly prehistoric scale — so fierce he didn't bother to flee when the fluorescent light flooded his nocturnal smorgasbord. Nor did he flee when I reached for the can of Chinese insecticide and assaulted him with a ten-second blast, leaving him motionless in a pool of poison foam. I awoke the following morning to find, not a cockroach, but a beautiful green frog, the toxic insect's antenna protruding from his dead mouth.

Through writing, then, these memories are concretized — details become words and a tone begins to emerge. In this case, a tone of mourning that surprises the author. Through simply recording the events, I find that the site of each incident is significant. By fixing the memories in

time, a theme of distance from, and nostalgia for those sites is developing.

### **THE PROBLEM WITH PROBLEM SOLVING**

Another problematic element shared by the progressive and traditional design camps alike is the identification of the designer as problem solver. Paraphrasing the educational psychologist E.L. Thorndike, Peter Rowe describes a problem in these terms: "A problem can be said to exist if an organism wants something but the actions necessary to obtain it are not immediately obvious." He goes on to describe three categories of design problems. Well-defined problems are those for which there is a clear and prescribed path to an outcome that is identifiable at the outset. Ill-defined problems, on the other hand, are those where neither the means nor the ends can be seen at the outset. Finally, there are wicked problems — problems for which there is "no explicit basis for the termination of problem-solving activity — no stopping rule."<sup>14</sup>

The traditional design model is situated mostly within the realm of ill-defined problems. A large part of the designer's job is to define the problem. In the expanded model, however, the design thinker thirstily

chases the wicked problems. Problems with “no explicit basis for the termination of problem solving activity” are the sources of lifelong investigation, the wells from which we draw again and again, the nodes from which we spring into research and to which we return to try out new ideas. They might, in fact, not be recognized as problems at all.

On the trail of a wicked problem, artifacts represent waypoints rather than solutions.

In a message to his thesis students, Matt Kahn, a professor in the Joint Program in Design at Stanford University describes the problem with problem solving:

Once identified, [needs] describe problems to be solved. This again may be too limited a view. Implicit in this is that the essential designer function is corrective or remedial — that designers necessarily right wrongs and that need equals problem or deficiency ... Design is equally valid when it builds upon positive conditions — taking advantage of inspiring opportunity with or

without the attending “problem.” Much of what we call art (i.e., poetry, music, painting) does this, that is, it addresses the overall human need for enrichment which often goes unidentified until one is confronted with a moving work. <sup>15</sup>

In a call for a new focus on critical practice, Andrew Blauvelt, Design Director at the Walker Art Center, echoes this sentiment:

Critical design is polemical, it asks questions and poses problems for the profession and users alike, it is opposed to traditional notions of problem-solving, and it eschews the singularity of a medium in favor of the multiplicities of social agency and effects. <sup>16</sup>

Kahn’s and Blauvelt’s comments underscore the point that as long as we identify ourselves as problem solvers, our success can only be measured in terms of whether or not we solve them and how well. Furthermore,

it restricts our attention to problems that potentially have solutions. The classification of a problem as wicked, then, lies not within the circumstances, but within the perspective of the designer who is faced with the material at hand. The education of a design thinker, therefore, must instill more curiosity than it quells, spawn more problems than solutions. To embrace the fountain of wicked problems requires the abandonment of our identity as problem solvers. To this end, process drawing is marvelous exercise.

### **DWELLING IN PROCESS**

Process drawing was part of a broader movement of process art that began in the late 1960s. Based primarily in sculpture, the artists engaged in the movement were reacting to an emphasis on formalism and the commodification of the art object. Their practices often shelved aesthetic decision-making by establishing procedures by which a drawing, sculpture, or other work would be made. As such, the work attempts to be staunchly anti-form and to dwell within the making, not the object, a reflection evident in the name of the movement. A well-known example is John

Cage's work with chance operations, where he consulted the I Ching to determine what marks or notes to make, and where, in both visual and sonic compositions.

Process drawing is almost antithetical to problem-solving. Process drawing asks the learner to suspend her attachment to outcome and product, to dwell within the process, to relish the wicked problems. For the designer, this suggests a model that is not without artifacts; but that the artifacts be considered more broadly in illuminating the complexity of issues rather than neatly solving them. Again, the metaphor of the artifact as waypoint, rather than destination, feels appropriate.

In process drawing, defined by Cornelia Butler as a work in which the making of the drawing becomes the drawing itself<sup>17</sup>, the marks made do not stand for anything. It would be impossible to argue that these drawings lie outside of any cultural context, but the motivation of the process attempts to lie outside of the hierarchical semiotic relay in its refusal to represent. Process art was fiercely anti-containment. In sculpture, materials would be strewn, thrown, or flung across the floor. In drawings, composition was denied as mark-making procedures were

carried off the page with no regard for its perimeter, reinforcing the incidental nature of the drawing as an object and reorienting the focus toward the making of the drawing.

This de-emphasis on product is the first gift this practice can bring to the design thinker. Since a need for product (any of the end artifacts of the design process, from a logo to a hospital) is often the impetus to begin the creative process, a de-emphasis on product removes the traditional catalysts or problems. This begins to illuminate a more circular, self-reflexive process that invites the designer to formulate and address his or her own questions, perhaps tapping into interests that fuel an ongoing, self-generated inquiry.

## **CONNECTIONS**

The move toward self-publishing, design authorship, and other self-initiated pursuits in the last ten years has done much to pave the way for designers to generate bodies of work outside of client-driven contexts. The graduate program at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) is subtitled, “The Designer as Author.” The model at SVA, however, is still wholly rooted

in professional practice. While the program’s literature emphasizes an interdisciplinary philosophy, stating that “students are encouraged to draw inspiration from other visual and communications arts who share authorial aspirations,” in the following breath they boast of the studio’s professional workspaces, “designed to simulate a real media firm, with spacious individual workstations.<sup>18)</sup> Steven Heller, the co-chair of the program is, after all, the originator of the “Designer as Authorpreneur” model. As such, SVA pushes entrepreneurship side-by-side with authorship.

Teaching designers how to maneuver with more agency in the world of publishing and manufacturing is empowering, but it is not transcendental. While the pairing of these two concepts — authorship and entrepreneurship — does expand the conventional boundaries of a designer’s territory, it does not change the shape of the territory itself. That is, it simply shifts the designer’s participation forward in the traditional system. The school studio’s emulation of a professional “media firm” suggests that the role of “Designer as Author” can be achieved with the same tools, diminishing opportunities for truly interdisciplinary exploration. The predominant tool in the traditional model has become, of course, the computer.

This brings us to the second gift of drawing. In a world where our role as makers (in its broadest sense — as writers, designers, communicators) is increasingly mediated by the computer, the value of reconnecting with the physical through a direct, material, mark-making process is not to be underestimated. The physical aspect of this can be enjoyed through many practices, but process drawing is especially well-suited, again because of the de-emphasis on results. The postponed decision-making afforded by pre-determined rules, and the non-representational qualities nurture a sort of meditative presence. I should specify that while many of the theories of process drawing can be extended to other materials and tools, including the computer<sup>19</sup>, I am referring to a practice that employs traditional drawing materials, specifically for the purpose of collapsing layers of technology between the body and the mark.

Yesterday, I picked up my pencil and I began to draw. I was thinking of my animals again, my rabbit. I unfurled a large

sheet of paper, taped it to the wall, and established a simple rule:

I would make one mark for each of these creatures. After 512 slow marks, I set down my pencil. 512 tiny deaths.

By quantifying and tallying, each death is given equal status, shifting the anecdotal to something broader. The page had become a site of mourning — not for specific lives, but for the life presence of creatures. As I record that experience here, in words, new facets are revealed. If process drawing affords the designer a temporary reprieve from the semiotic froth that dominates design, writing insists on complete immersion. One's place in relation to the systems one is surrounded by are exposed and demand to be accounted for. The personal essay asks the writer what she is willing to give up and what she will hold close to her. For example, I will never tell how I killed the toad. In its omission, however, a new theme, ripe for exploration, emerges.

When I moved to San Francisco, I remember remarking

about the absence of squirrels. As a city dweller with rural blood, I am in constant negotiation with my own relationship to the nature/culture divide. I do not so much mourn the lives of the rabbit, the squirrels, and the frog, but the vivid physical experience of mortality so absent from city life.

Process drawing is one way of reconnecting to nature, through materials, through standing still, and through a focus on making, outside of cultural expectation, implication, and the many critical considerations present when creating something for public consumption. Out of this, we can surprise ourselves, circumvent ingrained habits, by leaving some things to chance. Writing, then is a place where we can reflect on what chance has granted, thrust tiny kernels into the incubator of language and audience in order to discover what we are doing, and why. It is perhaps the place from which we navigate in order to find our way back to where we are. Together, when suggested as processes that might contribute to design research, this duet describes a designer's role through process, rather than product. Perhaps it suggests design, or at least design education,

simply as a critical way of being in the world — methods and strategies for making relationships, intersections, and themes visible and available. Certainly it is one such critical way of being in the world, and will reveal its own relationships and intersections to other disciplines as it grows up.

There is a mouse that visits my apartment regularly now. Her comings and goings are marked by soft-frayed holes in the corners of cereal boxes. I have named her Louise and I am quietly delighted that she found a portal into my home, my heart, and my work.

## ENDNOTES

1. Wayne Hunt, "Good habits and smart decisions: what to do in school and in the studio" (*AIGA Transitions e-newsletter*, Issue 9, May 2003).
2. Gunnar Swanson, "Graphic Design Education as a Liberal Art," (*Design Issues*, Spring 1994).
3. Ellen Lupton, "The Designer as Producer," (*The Education of a Graphic Designer*, Allworth Press, 1998).
4. Victor Margolin, "The Designer as Producer" *ICSID News* (February 2002).
5. Karl Gerstner, *Designer as Programmer* (Hatje Cantz, 2002).
6. Michael Rock, "The Designer as Author," (*Eye Magazine*, Spring 1996).
7. Michael Bierut, "Self and Others" by Jane Austin (*CIRCA 101*, Autumn 2002, pp. 40-43).
8. *A model not so much put forth as viable, but rather presented as D.O.A. as with any form of authorship after Barthes.* Adriano Pedrosa "(Writing & Design), {Like Everything Else, Point(s) to Death.}" (*Emigre* No. 35, Summer 1995).
9. William Drenttel, "The Written Word: The Designer as Executor, Agent and Provocateur," (*Communication Arts*, March/April 1993).
10. Steven Heller, "The Attack of the Designer Authorpreneur," (*AIGA Journal of Graphic Design*, vol. 16, n.2, 1998, pp.35-36).
11. William Drenttel, Rick Poynor, and others, "Adolf Wölfli Invents Design Brüt?" (*Design Observer*, January 5-13, 2004).
12. Joan Didion, "Why I Write" *New York Times Magazine*, December 5, 1976.
13. Gail Swanlund in videotaped interview with the author, January 19, 2004 at CCA.
14. Peter Rowe, *Design Thinking*, p. 39, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).
15. Matt Kahn, "Some Project Guidelines and Thoughts About the Program," (website of Stanford University Joint Program in Design, 2004).
16. Andrew Blauvelt, "Towards Critical Autonomy or Can Graphic Design Save Itself?" (*Emigre* No. 64, Winter 2003).
17. Cornelia Butler, "Ends and Means," *Afterimage* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).
18. Steven Heller and Lisa Talarico, "MFA | Design Mission," School of Visual Arts website.
19. The work of John Maeda's group at the MIT Media Lab is one of many examples.

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