THE PLAY INSTINCT IN DESIGN EDUCATION

Russian Formalist, Viktor Shklovsky, declared that "perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic" (Shklovsky 1990: 16). The recourse against *habitualization* is *defamiliarization,* the conscientious creation of unfamiliar and challenging work in order to stimulate a different perception (17). "Playful" design investigations—that is to say investigations that are less concerned with the outcome as they are with the process—are essential in engaging students and challenging their perceptions about graphic design and the creative process. Rigorous, playful investigations challenge the perceptions of the designer and the viewer as process quickly leads to the invigorating unknown.

Through the investigation of familiar materials such as wood, clay, concrete, wax, paper, sequins, stamps, and thread with typographic form in unfamiliar formats and contexts, we are creating objects that are refreshing in construction and perception. A hybrid of analog and digital, projects that engage the play instinct seek to bridge the gap between material and form, art and design, as well as heart, head, and hand.

keywords: *play instinct, flow, creative process, analog/digital, education*

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COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS OF GRAPHIC DESIGN STUDENTS

In our experience, graphic design students frequently cling to a number of firmly held misconceptions about graphic design and the creative process: (1) if it isn't made on a computer, it isn't graphic design, (2) the processes and principles they learn in art foundations and fine art classes are unrelated to the creative process in graphic design, and (3) the goal of the creative process is to achieve predictable, "correct" outcomes.

If these misconceptions are allowed to persist, students work under the assumptions that (1) graphic design is not an intellectual pursuit, but is instead the creation of artifacts inexorably tied to available software, and (2) creativity is superficial and formulaic. As a result, these students underestimate their own artistic potential, having decided that their fine art knowledge is not relevant to graphic design. They believe the acquiring of software skills and technological knowledge will reveal a magical formula that will lead them to creative success.

"Playful" design investigations, when employed in the classroom, are extremely effective in addressing these misconceptions and opening up other paths for creative effort. Playful investigations are, by definition, less concerned with the outcome and more concerned with process.

THE PLAY INSTINCT

In *Paul Rand: A Designer's Art,* Rand discusses the importance of the play instinct in design. Rand, like many before him, recognized the profound role of play in engaging students and facilitating deeper learning. He states, "... a problem with defined limits, with an implied or stated discipline (system of rules) that in turn is conducive to the instinct of play, will most likely yield an interested student and, very often, a meaningful and novel solution" (Rand 1985: 189).

Simply put, the psychology of play is conducive to learning and problem-solving. In order to play, students must adapt to a system of rules and constraints in the pursuit of a challenging goal. Rising to the challenge requires—among other things—skill, observation, concentration, patience, and systematic discovery. Achieving the goal is rewarding and exciting, even if the journey has at times been less than pleasurable. When learning allows for a fulfilling journey driven by individual decisions, the entire process is more meaningful and lessons are learned along the way.

It is no surprise that the psychology of play is very similar to the psychology of "optimal experience" or "flow" as presented by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. In his text, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience,* Csikszentmihalyi discusses the psychology of happiness at length. He asserts that our most fulfilling and happiest moments are moments when we achieve flow. *Flow* is "a sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult, or dangerous" (Csikszentmihalyi 2008: 71). Therefore, assignments built to engage the play instinct can also yield opportunities for students to achieve flow (and, ultimately, fulfillment).

FOSTERING THE PLAY INSTINCT

Rigorous, playful investigations challenge the perceptions of students as process quickly leads to the invigorating unknown. However, taking students on a journey into the unknown is not without its share of difficulties. Students harboring misconceptions about graphic design and the creative process are often consumed with anxiety. Focusing on the process is hard for students who want to follow A to B only in order to get to C, the predictable outcome.

There are several key factors in designing projects that encourage practice of the play instinct. As stated by Rand and Csikszentmihalyi , projects must conform to a system of rules and constraints. These rules and constraints guide students for the duration of the project. Projects must be difficult enough to present a challenge, but realistic enough to minimize anxiety and build confidence.

It is important to encourage students to exercise their powers of observation—to seriously contemplate the possibilities and materials at hand in search of creative potential. This can be achieved through many ways, but asking students to write about their decisions and process helps them slow down to observe, reflect, and then react. In observing and reflecting, students also adopt a curious mindset.

Placing an emphasis on analog forms of creating is also important in engaging the play instinct. Creating and thinking on the computer can be difficult and laborious. Often a simple design decision requires several software tools and clicks to create. However, thinking, sketching, and prototyping by hand is faster and much more intuitive, especially for students that have devoted a little over a year to developing hand skills in art foundation courses. This is not to say that the computer is strictly forbidden. The computer is a powerful tool for planning and editing. However, students should be dissuaded from rushing to the computer.

Iterative projects help students find comfort in the process. Iterations help ease the pressure of finding "correct" solutions as students learn there are many ways to approach an assignment. In addition, iterative projects set the stage for students to achieve "flow." According to Csikszentmihalyi, achieving "flow" takes effort and repetition.

ENGAGING THE PLAY INSTINCT IN CLASS ASSIGNMENTS

EXPERIMENTAL A–Z, 0–9

On the first day of class, we assign a semester-long project, *Experimental A–Z, 0–9*. In this assignment, students are required to make each letter and numeral of the Latin alphabet using a variety of materials and methods. Diversity is stressed as students are not allowed to use any material twice. Excellent analog and digital craft is emphasized because, after all, experimental is not synonymous with sloppy. A maximum of four letterforms can be created on the computer, though the computer may be used for planning and editing any and all letterforms. Finally, the majority of letterforms must retain typographic integrity, meaning they must be restrained enough to resemble typefaces. (See Figures 1 and 2.)

A few rules and parameters are given to offer gentle guidance. The intent is not to stifle the student, but to provide constraints so that the student may narrow his/her focus and formulate a plan for making. For example, the class may be required to visit the local dollar store/party supply store where each student must buy ten dollars worth of a single item. The item simply needs to be something that interests them. During the next class, they are instructed to split their purchase in half (sometimes this requires a hammer and/or a small saw) and pass one-half of their material to the person sitting to their right. Each student, now in possession of a material of personal interest and a classmate's material of interest, must create a letterform out of each material. In doing so, the student is required to observe and contemplate the potential of a material not of their own choosing, thereby exercising their powers of observation. It also affords students the opportunity to compare the final forms and discuss the

Figure 1. *O*, Lauren Cook. Assorted moss for floral arrangements, hot glue, and wire.

Figure 2. *O*, Ashley Tindall. Bristol board, twine, and glue.

observations and inspirations that lead each student to their unique letterforms. Other parameters include time specifications. For example, at least one letterform must utilize a week-long method. One letterform must be created in under five minutes, and so on. Halfway through the semester, students are asked to write a constraint on a piece of paper. From the stack, one constraint is ultimately chosen and redistributed to the entire class.

Experimental A–Z, 0–9 forces students to be observant, critical, and constantly engaged in some form of making throughout the semester. Some letterforms are more pleasing than others, but even the less-than-pleasing forms are valuable learning experiences. The iterative nature of the assignment yields a comprehensive catalog of investigations that often become the inspiration for future projects.

Very little class time is dedicated to *Experimental A–Z, 0–9*. Perhaps two to three days are devoted to discussing and/or working on the Latin letterforms, the rest of the semester is dedicated to in-class exercises and other assignments. Lectures and projects are supplemented with a variety of reading assignments. As students explore different methodologies and processes, they are reading about how to achieve "flow" by reading and discussing Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Every other week, they read about Martin Venezky's creative process and powers of observation in *It is Beautiful—Then Gone*.

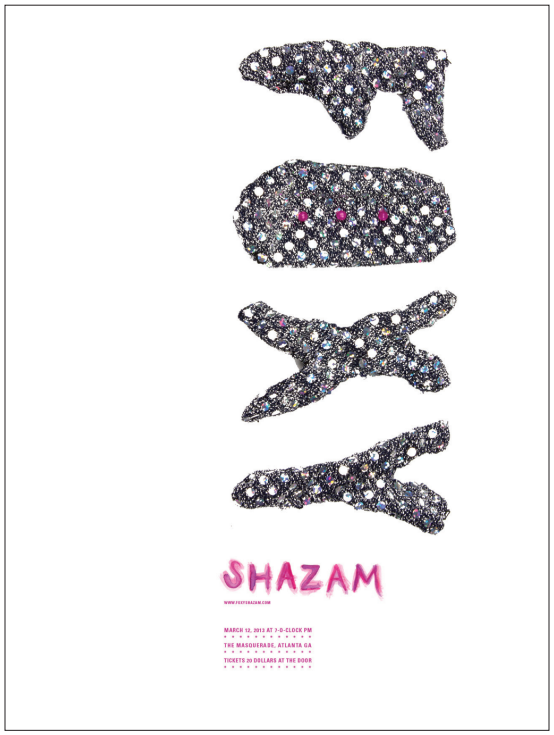

Figure 3. *Foxy Shazam*, Poster.
Madison DeFilippis. Fabric, buttons, thread, and watercolors.

Figure 4. *Spring AIGA Meeting,* Poster.
Lauren Cook. Cotton, spray paint, bristol board, and glue.

POSTER SERIES

The final project of the semester is to create three different posters for an event of the students' choosing. Continuing with an emphasis on iterative exploration, each poster must utilize a different material and/or method. This poster assignment gives students the opportunity to apply their freshly-honed skills of observation and making in a more practical and realistic project wherein students must communicate and design with a hypothetical context and client in mind. In this assignment, we focus on designing holistically. Material manipulations are happening while the student explores composition and hierarchy through sketches. An integration of typography and image is emphasized.

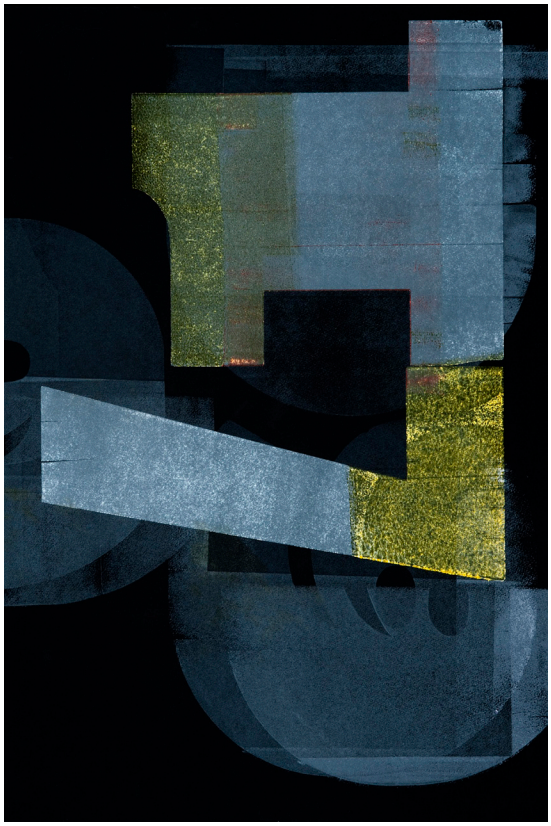

Figure 5. *Lucky Sevens*, Poster.
Joey Hannaford. Letterpress monoprint on Arches paper.

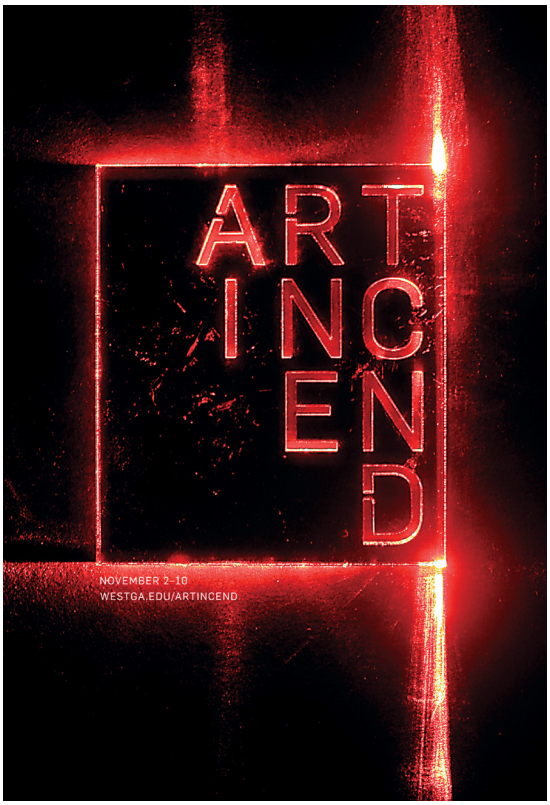

Figure 6. *Art Incend,* Poster.
Cassie Hester. Custom laser-cut acrylic, red laser pointers, and black paper.

CONCLUSION

Focusing on the creative process in the classroom is empowering for students as well as professors. When students are less concerned with achieving a solution that is "right" or "wrong" and are more concerned with investing time in process to achieve intriguing solutions, both parties are allowed to adopt a curious and reflective mindset. In sharing methods and explorations—explorations of faculty included—the class is able to learn from and build upon the knowledge and discoveries of others. A momentum is gained through rigorous play as students abandon their misconceptions and embrace their newfound confidence in intellectual, emotional, and material pursuits.

REFERENCES

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