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ILLUSTRATION
RESEARCH
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Illustration Research Methods

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Illustration Research Methods

Rachel Gannon and Mireille Fauchon

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Defining illustration practice, principles and methods. A framework for researching as an illustrator.

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Using narrative theory to analyse how narratives are constructed and communicated. Storytelling as an illustrative research method and how stories function in the 'real world'. Distinctive methods for reading, analysing and interpreting texts as an illustrator and how words and text can be illustration.

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Where and how to start researching when working with in documentary and journalistic practices. Methods for researching the lived experience of others, including listening and observing, and engaging people and communities through practice. Navigating issues and concerns around authenticity, truth, representation, accountability and positioning.

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Making as a distinctive research method, where the workshop is a laboratory, and thinking happens through experimentation and prototyping. Understanding materials, tools and objects and how they hold and convey meaning. Applying illustrative thinking and methods to found objects, 3d forms, tactile works and the virtual realm.

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Why an understanding of political and economic ideas and structures is needed for an informed research practice. Strategies and methods the illustrator can use to 'activate' audiences and disseminate ideas. The illustrator as facilitator and working with people and communities.

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Pedagogic ideas and methods and how to develop your own distinctive approach or philosophy. Using illustration as a method and an outcome to teach / learn other subjects including creating educational experiences and activities, using storytelling and (self) narrativisation and interactivity, and performative methods.

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Speculative imaginings for illustration as a discipline, practice and method.

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Practical advice and useful information for proposals, interviews and working with others. How to ensure a reflective, responsible and ethical approach to research.

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INTRODUCTION

The ideas in this book have developed over many years. We met as students in 2006, both specialising in illustration on the then named Communication Art and Design MA programme at the Royal College of Art. From that point we formed a co-supportive friendship and went on to become colleagues and collaborators, all the while navigating and negotiating our individual roles as illustrators, practitioners, educators and researchers.

Throughout our professional lives we have fortunately found ourselves working within an expansive community of practice, encompassing creatives, thinkers, makers, educators and theorists, all highly skilled and knowledgeable across a diverse range of specialisms. The critical position at which we find ourselves has, in no small part, been influenced by the generosity of this informative network.

To describe the illustration industry as changing is now somewhat platitudinous. What can be asserted with confidence is that the field is as wide as it is amorphous. No predicted visual, or indeed creative, response, can be expected of the contemporary practitioner. We believe contemporary illustration practice to be at a critical point.

The expansion of illustration practice goes hand in hand with its rise in popularity among prospective students. The educational environment is often where the most exploratory forms of practice are found. What we urgently need to consider is how to foster this ambition in such a way that can translate and have application within an increasingly precarious professional environment. Students can graduate to find a fissure between the reality of a professional practice and the experimental ways of working encouraged in education, and struggle to transfer the skills and knowledge they've gained to work in adjacent fields. This has prompted an irreversible shift towards the formation of a subject no longer confined by parameters set by industry or business. New agendas are fuelled by imagination, inventiveness and yearning aspiration.

Students are consistently the most valuable resource any educator can draw from, and it is here that we look to ascertain what the future might hold for illustration. The students we have worked with have constantly challenged our understanding of the forms that illustration can take and the ways it can operate, and they humbly remind us of our position as facilitators, not connoisseurs.

About this book

The impetus to write this book was born from a recognition that no texts could be found on any generic academic reading lists that captured our burgeoning philosophy of illustration as a discipline. Despite a concerted effort among the international academic community – notably the Illustration Research Network – to establish new benchmarks for the study of illustration, we recognised a serious shortfall in the subject of specific critical discourse. With practice-based research being the mainstay of much of our approach to teaching, we wanted to produce a text that paid particular attention to the mechanisms of illustration. Too often, emphasis of illustration work is placed on the finished artefact, the stylistic decisions made and/or the message conveyed. However, much of our time working with students focuses on developing methods, the

processes of thinking and doing, which enable an intelligent and articulate body of work. To advance the subject, what is required is a close analysis of the methods through which it is determined, the means of production and the rigorous processes and considerations that inform the most seemingly miniscule of decisions.

This book attempts to describe the methods we recognise as distinctive within contemporary practice and to acknowledge them, not only as integral to the realisation of an illustration artefact, but intrinsic to the holistic creative outcomes. Rather than dwell on finished products, we address the *hows* and *whys* and analyse the ways in which the most ambitious of illustration practice can operate and perform.

Who can use this book?

This is a practical text written with students, academics, theorists and practicing illustrators in mind. It can be used as a manual for reference, or an aid when guidance or support is needed. It is not a 'how to' guide as there are no 'right' or 'wrong' ways of working. The methods we describe are transferable. They can also be adapted and applied to suit the needs of the individual project at hand. Practice and theory are addressed as one.

Constellations

The structure of the book aims to support individual practices and new ways of working, rather than predetermining a singular approach. Each of the five main chapters (Authorship, Reporting, Crafting, Activism and Educating) explores a different facet of illustration practice.

The titles given to the chapters in this book were assigned very early on in the writing process. They were only ever intended as a loose framework of the key concerns and roles we recognised illustrators being informed by. We had always anticipated that eventually we would arrive at more specific, perhaps poetic, titles, but found that the diversity of practice which we were describing needed a suitably broad umbrella beneath which to shelter. The headings should thus not be understood by their most literal and familiar meanings, but rather be regarded in their broadest application. Different methods and concerns are then clustered around these central tenets, addressing critical ideas, theoretical frameworks, and concerns and questions related to the various motifs.

This book acts as a guide; a map of constellations to encourage the reader to make connections between individual methods that suit their needs and desires, and in doing so, to form distinctive practitioner-specific illustration methodologies.

What is it that you do?

This book is a demonstration for those who wish to commission or collaborate with illustrators but perhaps find the creative process elusive. This text is intended to consecrate links between exploratory educational practices and professional applications in an industry where the ability to communicate with empathy and clarity is a much-desired and sought-after skill. Making known the

value of our creative discipline to future employers, collaborators and commissioners outside of the ‘bubble’ of academic study will ensure our graduates enter a professional landscape where experimental practices are valued and flourish.

Models of practice

This book is foremost concerned with the methods through which illustration is performed, rather than a survey of contemporary practice. Throughout the process of penning this text we have been adamant that a diverse sample of illustration should be included, with emphasis on practices that are particularly experimental, challenging or speculative in nature.

We have never desired to produce a catalogue of exemplary, or historically noteworthy individuals or works. We would not assume the authority to declare the simplistic binary definitions of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ illustration. Nor do we claim this as an all-encompassing compendium indicative of all global practices. Such a feat would be impossible. Rather, we have drawn from our experiences working in education where we have found ourselves the most exhilarated and excited for future prospects.

It was decided from the beginning that many of the featured practitioners would be in the early stage of their careers, and equal value would be attributed to student works, self-initiated and commissioned projects.

Not all the works here are strictly illustrative, and by this we mean the producers don’t necessarily self-identify as illustrators or define their projects as illustration by intention. These have nevertheless been included because they share common principles and display an ingenuity from which we can learn. We have also included vernacular or incidental works, such as protest posters, that we recognise as operating with illustrative effect.

A NOTE ON ILLUSTRATIONS

A book about illustration must certainly be illustrated. The images featured here serve as illustrative aids for the concepts described in writing, as well as portrayals of illustrative projects in their own right. Within illustration, context is everything; we have therefore endeavoured to use images that are an accurate representation of illustrations in their intended context, where appropriate, unless this hampered readability. In such cases illustrations have been reproduced in insolation.

At times, we have featured multiple images from the same project to give a better flavour of the works in their intended use. As appropriate, and in line with the ethos of this text, we have endeavoured to illuminate methods in process rather than finalised outcomes.

Acknowledgement should be made that illustrations in original context exist with scale, materiality and tactility that no reproduction can imitate completely. These facsimiles cannot replace the human experience of encountering and engaging with these works in their intended environments. Those interested in learning more about these projects are warmly encouraged to extend their investigations and to seek out the comic, print, newspaper, website or film and experience the works for themselves.

TRANSLATIONAL TYPE

Angelo Stitz

A note from the designer



As a designer I am always trying to make the essence of content tangible. This was strongly in mind when I was asked to find my own interpretation of this book's title, *Illustration Research Methods*. For me, illustration stands for a mark: a dot, a line a fragment of human trace that can be read and interpreted. Research is the intention to find meaning in this individual mark. Methods are possible ways to achieve this endeavour.

Readers of this publication become part of this creative process. Each engagement is an individual research process where signs, here letter forms, grow and merge to finally constitute meaning. The transitions and juxtapositions of these signs relate to how this book can be used to support how creative practices are encountered.

I developed a specific typeface, seen on the cover and chapter opening pages, where I broke down each alphabetic character to its stroke fragments, revealing their constituent forms. An alphabetic character is often seen as a closed entity, but deconstruction reveals that most share similarities. Some characters, *E* or *F* for example, share the same fragments, while others such as *S* cannot be broken down further.

All these different forms overlap and merge with the character fragments from the previous line of text to construct new unexpected characters. Furthermore, it allows for a space where new undefined signs are revealed that cannot as yet be read, but are still recognisable as unusual typographic characters.

From my point of view, this is exactly what this book is about. Making connections between processes that at first seem to be isolated. The three words *Illustration Research Methods* separated here just by a blank space, to my mind, can also be translated into *Intuition Exploration Systematics* making clear the tension that exists between these

words. Using the words 'intuition' and 'systematic' in the same sentence is almost contradictory. However, I understand this book serves to disprove these oppositions, so original perspectives can be connected, triggering a generative process for the emergence of new artistic practices.

1 ILLUSTRATION RESEARCH

PART 1: ILLUSTRATION

- 014 — Definitions
 - Illustration as process
- 015 — Identity
 - Language and terminology
- 016 — The principles of illustration practice
- 017 — Shifting roles – an expanded practice
- 018 — Can illustration ever be authorless?

PART 2: ILLUSTRATION AND RESEARCH

- 019 — A social practice
- 020 — Research into, through and for illustration –
a framework for categorising methods
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- 022 — Originality in illustration
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ILLUSTRATION
 HAS COME TO NOT ONLY DESCRIBE
 BUT ALSO ONE OF COGNITION,
 THINKING, AND REASONING.

PRACTICE OF CREATIVE MAKING
 BUT ALSO ONE OF COGNITION,
 THINKING, AND REASONING.

PART 1: ILLUSTRATION

Illustration is an enthralling discipline. As educators, we have gladly learnt to abandon expectations as year after year we witness practices develop that disrupt with gusto all previous known parameters. Professionally, illustrators are now multifarious beings, positioning their practices to respond to the subject matters *they* recognise as most urgent in the here and now. Illustration has come to not only describe a practice of creative making but also one of cognition, thinking and reasoning, capable of bearing significant theoretical weight. The illustrator's knowledge is not only contained in the hands or in the manipulation of materials, it is also present in their canny perception, acute questioning and empathetic, intersubjective rapport. Illustrative forms and material outcomes refuse to be taken for granted. Practices are now expansive, as illustrators extend and shift their works to assume new roles and responsibilities. No longer is it sufficient to look to the past for reference and rationale. Rather, we must self-determine from within the crucible of a contemporary discipline, and project outwards with earnest and uncompromised ambition.

Definitions

The mandate of this book is not to anchor an all-encompassing definition of illustration, or to claim to exemplify all practices. With a discipline so chimera-like as contemporary illustration practice, such a task would be as futile as it would be thankless. However, it is important to recognise that definitions can offer clarity, a sense of belonging and an acknowledgement of distinction. Distinctions infer specialist knowledge and expertise; they describe a landscape within which we position ourselves while acknowledging a lineage and legacy. 'Illustration' encompasses much more than just visual additions to printed written texts, yet rudimentary dictionary definitions can still be found describing illustration as 'a picture illustrating a book, newspaper' etc. There certainly are forms of illustration that are more familiar and easily determinable, including decorative or representational pictorial images made in response to written sources. Professionally, illustration is also commonly associated as being brief-led and belonging within commissioned dynamics for commercial application within industries such as publishing, advertising, packaging and so on.

As practices emerge that divert, sometimes entirely, from familiar conventions, what is needed is a recognition of the increasing pluralism within illustration, and with it a confident and sophisticated vocabulary through which it can be critically described and examined.

This book claims a terminology designed specifically to articulate the languages and mechanisms through which illustration operates. The content is by no means definitive, but offers a working lexicon with the expectation that it will and should be extended, developed and reformed.

Illustration as process

With discipline-specific critical discourse in its infancy, the methods used by illustrators have never been formally framed in academic language. The absence of a common framework leaves little precedence in guiding discussions of how

illustration methods might function and perform. Analysis and critique of illustration is often only concerned with visual outcomes. Outside the educational environment, analysis rarely extends to examining the complex, and often highly individual, methodologies involved in realising works of illustration. When processes are addressed, there can be a tendency to frame the discussion as examples of ‘good’ vocational practice. Materials and processes can be fetishised, with the figure of the illustrator seen as an elusive genius whose persona, visual style or methods of creation dare not be shared for fear of imitation.

However, if we consider the phrasing ‘to illustrate’ as an active verb, the illustration outcome or artefact forms just a limited part of a wider process in motion. Furthermore, it presents new questions of how illustration can be applied and commodified. Illustration is typically purchased as an outcome, whether acquired as a service or as an artefact. Might illustrators enjoy new employment opportunities if value was duly placed on the expertise involved in communicating and engaging with targeted audiences? This might involve illustration applied as methodology, or an illustrator engaged professionally as a creative consultant.

Identity

One of the most important factors influencing the future of illustration is giving illustrators the confidence to describe themselves as such. Many of those exploring innovative or expanded notions of illustration choose to adopt more all-encompassing monikers – creative, designer, maker, artist – for lack of a seemingly more suited title. This means those actively engaged in challenging or progressing the discipline remove themselves and their pioneering practices from discipline-specific discussions.

Illustration’s versatility has often lead it to be described as interdisciplinary. As with all disciplines, there is no one particular method, form or concern, but this does not mean illustration is inherently interdisciplinary, and to describe it as such can induce feelings of insecurity. Illustration has its own distinctive methods and strategies. These are not, as it were, ‘interdisciplinary’ as in oscillating between various disciplines, but are particular within illustration. Of course, when practiced with innovation, illustration will look towards and learn from other subjects, but this is not to deny that there are recognisable discipline-specific models.

Language and terminology

Regardless of whether illustration is considered an established or emergent discipline, it has lacked the subject-specific critical eloquence established within other artistic disciplines. While much is gained from engaging in cross-disciplinary discourse, illustration too often looks outside itself for rationalisation and inspiration in the absence of its own intellectual tools. Terminologies and languages are frequently adopted from other fields to articulate illustration-specific behaviours and engagement; for example, illustration is often described as being ‘read’.

The development of illustration relies on investment in discipline-specific theory. To neglect this is a failure to recognise the complex processes in operation and to risk illustration being marginalised as a lesser art form. Within this text we have attempted to isolate and describe methods, not appropriated from the other subjects, but those we recognise as being particular to illustration.

Method

A tool, process or technique utilised to realise a specific aim.

Methodology

A strategic system or series of methods selected to conduct a sustained inquiry or to perform a task.

The principles of illustration practice

In order to discuss how illustration performs, it is necessary to first offer a working model of the principles of illustration. The following describes the mechanisms we recognise as being commonly operational within illustrative works regardless of their final form, the subject matter addressed or the impetus for the project. The points made here do not claim to be exhaustive, nor do we suggest all works of illustration must concede to all these mandates. Rather, we intend to create a reference in order to aid a shared understanding of why we regard the works we discuss as illustration. This template also allows us to identify and relate those works which are not strictly illustrative as relevant to our inquiries.

PRINCIPLES

Social/Public – practices often involve social engagement with people or the public. This may refer to research methods dependent on personally engaging with other creative collaborations or more pragmatic negotiation with professional partners and commissioners. Audience specific – audience reception is considered. Communicative – works that actively seek to engage and be understood. Multiform – illustration is not defined by material boundaries and can manifest in any way, including sculptural, time-dependent or virtual forms. Intent – practices are conscious and informed by motive, even if the knowledge sought or the results gained are initially unknown. For example, intentional practice may be exploratory, diagnostic or convey information.

COMMON STRATEGIES

Narrative – storytelling and narrative as a method of engaging, communicating and/or presenting information and content. Creative interpretation – use of fiction or imagination to extend knowledge and/or relate to and engage with audiences. Participation – works that rely on or incorporate audience engagement in order to be fully realised. Examples of participation could be physical engagement with a work such as reading a publication, a public showcase to gauge reception or involving audiences within activities such as workshops or performances. Participation may occur at any stage within an illustration project. Responsive – illustration methods are responsive and adaptable. Methodologies are tailored to the task at hand, the environment, people and situations that the illustrator is engaged with.

BEHAVIOURS

Subjective – often describing personal or specific viewpoints or positions. Empathic – engaging through use of emotion, e.g. humour, compassion, anxiety, etc. Persuasive – able to inform and influence opinion or decision-making. Provocation – used to prompt consideration or to challenge preconceived notions. Transferability – works that are mobile or adaptable to contexts and audiences, for example, illustration contained or realised in book form are portable; screen-based works can be disseminated via the internet. This is often linked with impermanence and/or widely reproduced ephemeral works. Accessibility – works that are open and/or particularly targeted to diverse audiences. This may be also understood as works that engage groups who are not traditional audiences of the arts and/or may not consider themselves to be engaging with an art form. Accessibility can also be inferred by context, e.g. through operating or being encountered outside of traditional art venues.

TOOLS AND INSTRUMENTS

Here, we are not referring to art materials and processes used in the production of illustrative artworks (there is a more expansive discussion of what might constitute a tool within illustration in Chapter 4: Crafting), but rather the tools and instruments that enable and facilitate illustration as a wider discipline. In no particular order of significance, these can be understood as: Organisations and individuals who fund and commission illustration. Venues and platforms that host or showcase illustrative works, such as exhibition spaces, book fairs, online forums, cinemas, etc. Agents who represent illustrators professionally, facilitate the production of illustration projects and liaise professionally on behalf of the illustrator. Organisations who employ illustrators for their professional expertise, for example as consultants, researchers or data visualisers. Retailers who trade in illustrative works and artefacts. Contexts for illustrative art works such as the screen, the page, the poster, the stage set, the fabric sample, etc.

Shifting roles – an expanded practice

In professional practice, illustrators will likely experience different ways of working, as appropriate to the task and their preferences as creative individuals. Self-initiated projects are no longer confined to occupying time and exercising skills between commissions. Illustrators are increasingly autonomous in identifying professional opportunities and actively seeking out markets and contexts for their practices.

Authorial practices, more specifically, place the illustrator in control for the conception and realisation of their projects. Here, the individual dictates the concerns, themes and portrayal of their illustrative content. Such projects may be produced entirely independently and without influence from any external agent.

Authorial and autonomous practices are now far from novel. A ‘working’ illustrator can expect to find themselves engaged in a variety of projects, often moving across self-directed, commissioned and collaborative projects. As approaches, forms and professional dynamics shift within illustration, disruption is brought to familiar commodity-based, transactional or commissioned relationships. Hierarchies between clients, agents, designers, publishers and indeed among illustrators are being challenged and in some cases, disappearing altogether. Illustrators are proactively establishing expanded practices through which they can broadly apply their skill sets and occupy a number of roles.

Autonomous practice places responsibility on illustrators to manage their careers. Self-directed projects need not be, and rarely are, entirely independent, but can place an individual largely in control of managing all stages of realisation and dissemination. This will involve a whole host of necessary requirements outside of creative conception and making, such as: project management, liaising with various stakeholders, identifying and securing funding stream, ensuring publicity, outsourcing any technical support and so forth.

Illustrators are therefore required to be literate, if not accomplished across wide areas of knowledge. To sustain their career, the autonomous illustrator must be ingenious, adaptable and entrepreneurial. When not expert themselves, they must be proactive and adroit in seeking realistic and appropriate solutions.

Analytical thinking

Methodical and logical thinking or reasoning; the ability to identify and solve problems.

Often illustrators form supportive networks where experience and knowledge can be shared, exchanged or traded. Forums may be virtual, connecting individuals via online medias or platforms. Like-minded individuals also form collectives, sometimes sharing working environments or studio spaces where individual practices and collaborative partnerships co-function.

Can illustration ever be authorless?

It is not only authorial and autonomous practices that have introduced the illustrator as a public-facing figure. Illustrators create a sense of identity through establishing a distinctive visual aesthetic. This recognisability can establish an individual's associations with a particular field of work, i.e. advertising, editorial and interior design. Reputations for dealing with particular themes or subject matters can be reinforced, particularly when illustrators become ubiquitous and are expected to be found within certain contexts or environments. Distinguishability communicates reliability and continuity of performance to a commissioner; visibility keeps the practitioner in mind, a reminder of their professional proficiency in a highly competitive industry. However, once these associations are consecrated it can be difficult to distance oneself from those expectations.

Recognisability and visibility, whether by name or style, also bring into question whether an illustrator can ever truly be independent from the content, messages and impact of the work they deliver. An illustrator may wish to remain anonymous for various reasons: to maintain a personal distance, ensure an impartial reception, etc. However, online profiles are often very publically accessible with the intent of ensuring professional visibility. Contact details are readily available and social media platforms allow for wide-reaching commentary and opinion to be voiced.

To use the example of a commissioned pictorial image, decisions as to what and how the content is portrayed in the illustration; the emphasis of the message, the sympathies it suggests, may all be dictated by the client, art director and/or editors. That illustration, then rendered in a distinctive visual language and available to public reception, unmistakably carries the stylistic signature of the illustrator who produced it. Such a situation could find an illustrator being criticised or called to account for works in which they had restricted creative input and/or limited knowledge of the wider debates that the work sits within.

PART 2: ILLUSTRATION AND RESEARCH

Within illustration the term 'research' is used to describe many forms of investigative and interpretative practices. These methods can initially appear disparate or unrelated, for example, the following can all be described as forms of research: internet searches, reading, annotating, conducting fieldwork, creative experimenting, testing materials, interviewing, discussing ideas and so forth. This can leave the process of research elusive and encourage the common misconception of research being separate from the overall creative project. This is not so. Research is ingrained within the creative process. It is necessary when gaps in knowledge, a problem or a question is identified and

further insight or experience is needed in order to progress, arrive at a solution or offer new propositions. This process is not confined to a particular point within any illustration project but rather is ongoing and actively impacts the development of the work. Some gaps in knowledge can be expected while other areas in need of development or further investigation will be unexpected and emerge as the project matures. The method or interpretative practice necessary will be governed by the nature of the concern as well as the preferences, habits and interests of the individual practitioner.

While there are so often recurring themes and ways of working within an illustration practice, the illustrator's methodology is often tailored and performed ad hoc to suit individual projects. Methods are always context specific and must be relevant to the task at hand. Familiar approaches may be tweaked or combined to create inventive multi-methods in direct response to the circumstances and situations the illustrator finds themselves in.

The ensuing discoveries, interests and apprehensions that can arise as part of the research process inform and propel the project forward, sometimes in entirely unforeseen ways. These developments should not be feared, but rather expected and enjoyed.

A social practice

Illustrators have a heightened sensitivity to context. As a visual communication art form that is often applied and mediated, *context* is more readily understood as the situating and placement of the work. Illustrators are always urged to consider to whom it is that they intend to speak to and what information they intend to convey. They are innately audience and context aware; anticipating variability of reception and response, and thus tailoring their methods of interpretation accordingly. Such concerns are not limited to the latter stages of an illustration project at which point works become public facing. This receptivity and adaptability to context and audience is so deeply ingrained within the ontology of illustration, it is always at play. Ingenuity is a principal expertise of the illustrator and this is evident throughout the methods they use.

Illustration is fundamentally engaged in the social world because it is produced to perform within it. Audiences exist in real-world contexts and encounters with illustration are not limited exclusively to the traditional spaces where the arts are usually experienced. In short, illustration is inclusive, people orientated and able to operate in everyday, social life. With communication, audience and context being central leitmotifs, illustration research methods often involve direct engagement with the social world.

The illustrator's strategy might take its lead from the practices and activities of everyday life (see Chapter 3: Reporting). Rather than formal, empirical research methods, these quotidian interpretation practices are the kind used by anyone and everyone to gain insight of a social situation. In many of the methods we discuss, the illustrator emerges as a highly present figure. Rather than working covertly or at a discrete distance, they are highly involved, acting as facilitators and/or joint participants within the research encounter (see Chapter 6: Education). These methods may be considered to be the work of illustration (see Chapter 5: Activism), or emerge from the illustrative research activity (see Chapter 6: Education).

Subjectivity

The principle of being open to multiple and variable interpretations.

Research into, through and for illustration – a framework for categorising methods

Illustration research methods oscillate between a wide range of practices that encompass any combination or number of studious, practical, theoretical and creative-making activities. While we adhere that illustration methods are often multipurpose and transferable, albeit adapted to requirement, Christopher Frayling's (1993)¹ oft-cited distinctions of research *into*, *through* and *for* art and design is a useful model to help distinguish between categories of research practices in relation to illustration.

Within the chapter designs of this book we have not explicitly specified the methods addressed as belonging within these categories, nor do we show any preference between them. A methodology is a tailored process specific to individual needs and so often illustration interpretive practices have simultaneous uses informing a project in a multitude of ways. Rather, we consider the framework divisions of 'into', 'through' and 'for' helpful in emphasising the breadth of what can validly be described as 'research' within illustration, and furthermore, as an aid for illustrators to better understand the roles their methods play within their individual practices.

RESEARCH *into* ILLUSTRATION Critical studies of illustrative practices. This might involve analytical discourses concerning illustrative works or artefacts; methods and processes within illustration practices; historical studies relating to illustrative movements and contexts, the works and legacy of individual practitioners or collectives and so forth. Such research may or may not be conducted by illustrators. This text can be regarded as an example of research *into* illustration.

RESEARCH *through* ILLUSTRATION Research conducted and performed through the act of illustration practice. This might involve: creative experimentation across materials, tools and processes; development work exploring different and/or innovative ways in which illustration may be performed and/or operate; action research to test ideas or enable the development of projects, for example, peer group discussion, exhibition and/or performing of illustration. Practice-led and practice-based research falls within this category, the former describing knowledge that is acquired and develops through creative acts, and the latter whereby knowledge is contained and described within a creative work.

RESEARCH *for* ILLUSTRATION Preparatory work to inform the development of a project or to produce an outcome. This might involve sourcing reference materials for creative inspiration; acquiring technical skills or learning processes necessary to produce outcomes.

Rigour in illustration

As a public-facing communication arts discipline, illustrators must assume responsibility for the messages they impart to the world. Research journeys are seldom straightforward; they can begin with an assured intention that ends up being merely a point of departure toward an entirely unexpected project. Illustration interpretation practices are also likely to be highly inventive, impromptu

and/or led in part by tacit instinct. While no two methodologies will ever be the same, it is still possible to strive for and ensure a rigorous illustration practice. Even when working intuitively it should still, albeit retrospectively, be possible to comprehend and justify the rationales for decisions made.

It is important to comprehend that difficulty, and even failure, does not always imply that a method has been unsuccessful. Some ways of working, particularly those that are new to the practitioner or even novel as research methods, will require perseverance, testing and adaptation if needs be. Critical reflection and analysis are key to rigorous practice, alongside regular contemplation of motives to ensure choices are justifiable, convincing and thorough.

The following points provide an adaptable set of considerations to be referred to periodically throughout projects. It may be helpful to answer these questions in writing or through discussion with a supportive peer group. Keeping a record of responses can help chart progress and reveal areas for development.

What are the aims and intentions of your project? For clarity, aims identify areas of concern or interest, i.e. I aim to explore the housing crisis in my home town. Intentions describe what you would like to achieve through your practice, i.e. I intend to showcase experiences of homelessness from a range of different perspectives.

What are the various methods you can use to acquire the information, experience or knowledge you need to progress? (It may be helpful to refer to the previous section outlining research into, through and for illustration.)

What research methods are best suited to the needs of the project and why?

What methods do you prefer and why?

What factors might inform or influence your results?

Do these influence factors then compromise your project in any way? If so, how?

How do you determine what success and failure of methods are relevant to your aims and intentions?

How much time do you invest in pursuing a line of inquiry before moving on or adapting your methods? What governs this decision-making?

Are you documenting, storing and/or systematising your progress in such a way that it is coherent and readily available for reference as necessary?

Are you able to position your practice and/or the project against other works, illustrative or otherwise, exploring similar themes?

What audiences/participants/collaborators/facilitators will you need to engage with your work?

What are the best methods for engaging stakeholders with your project, as necessary? (It may be helpful to refer to the previous section The principles of illustration practice, describing common strategies, behaviours, tools and instruments.)

Through what forms – material, physical or otherwise – should illustrative works be realised, and why?

What are the relevant contexts for these works and how do you envisage them operating? How can this be tested?

Objectivity

Emphatic and verifiable interpretations of knowledge or information.

Originality in illustration

A contribution of 'new knowledge' that is of value to the disciplinary field and/or subject area is often a stipulation of professional research practices. While this may seem like a tall order, an offering of 'new knowledge' need not be such a daunting proposition. It might simply refer to a way of working not previously tried before, or the address of a subject matter from a unique perspective. It is also possible to reach the end of a research project, having explored a subject by all possible and appropriate means, to discover there is no new knowledge to be found; this can also be considered 'new knowledge'.

Within illustration practice, originality can encompass so much more than the all too frequent emphasis on developing a distinctive 'style' or 'visual language'. Illustration is able to contribute originality through the subject matters it addresses, the methods it uses to explore them and the knowledge that is brought to light by these creative investigations. The term 'originality' is not only used to denote universally pioneering works, it can also refer to the discipline specific achievements or the personal development of a practitioner experimenting with a new way of working. All of these endeavours require courage and risk-taking. This non-exhaustive list offers ways in which originality through illustration practice might be demonstrated:

Addressing an issue or topic underexplored by illustrators.

Incorporating a site-specific illustration work into a new location.

Synthesising illustrative concepts or methods in new ways.

Collaborating with a practitioner from another discipline.

Introducing a pre-existing illustrative work to a new audience.

Testing the transferability of an illustrative methodology within a new research subject.

Collaborating with another illustrator at a different stage in their career.

Making a visual interpretation of something directly observed but never before visually represented.

Theorising illustrative practices.

Conducting critical inquiries of pre-existing illustrative works and/or movements never before analysed.

Placing or performing an illustrative work in an environment where illustration has never been encountered.

Using illustration to conduct research into a subject thus far unexplored through creative investigation.

Engaging an audience previously unfamiliar with illustration as a discipline.

Producing illustrations to accompany non-literary texts not previously illustrated.

Using illustration to visualise non-visual concepts.

Incorporating research methods from other disciplines into an illustrative practice.

Producing a new illustrative interpretation of a pre-existing illustrative work.

Using a process or media unfamiliar to illustration practice.

Using illustration to address concerns within another discipline.

Endnote

1. Frayling, C. (1993), 'Research in art and design',
Royal College of Art Research Papers.

Qualitative research

Research processes using methods, often observation, which yield subjective feedback or data. The information collected is often descriptive and not numerical.