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**An Introduction to The Manifesto for Illustration Pedagogy:**

**A Lexicon for Contemporary Illustration Practice**

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**i. An Expanded Practice**

We met whilst studying at the Royal College of Art in 2006, where we were both specialising in illustration within an interdisciplinary communication design M.A programme. We were peers as students, aware of each other’s work and sharing friendship networks, but it was only later, when our careers had begun to take shape and we were brought together as academic colleagues, that we recognised a kinship in aspiration that we shared for contemporary illustration practice.

As students, we were encouraged by a particularly radical group of tutors to take a holistic approach to understanding *our practice* and that it could comfortably encompass different facets of our lives and appear to us in unfamiliar shapes and forms. We both took on myriad jobs and roles, worked to get independent projects off the ground, and strove to earn in order to support these projects. We also quite literally travelled the length and breadth of the United Kingdom teaching undergraduate courses as visiting tutors working with educators and students from all background and across all levels. During these times, we clung to the enduring sentiment of our former tutors to reassure ourselves that our work as illustrators was not confined to the ever-decreasing time spent in our studios working around the academic timetable. The time spent writing, thinking and discussing illustration was *also* our practice, as were the multiple roles and identities we occupied in the often-hazy boundaries between our personal and professional lives.

 As early-career educators we navigated and negotiated through our ever-evolving understanding of our subject, our academic positioning situating us closer to the students as peers. The realities of ‘professional practice’ and what that may encompass within its complex entirety would likely be the same landscape they would soon be entering.

**ii. A Community of Practice**

The role of the guest lecturer is challenging: dipping in and out of teams, long expensive commutes, and delivering various schemes of work to ever-changing faces meeting with the constant panic of forgotten or never-learnt names. Along with the struggles are infinite potentials, however. The life of the sessional tutor brings a rich experience, and we found ourselves involved in an expansive community of educators, all highly skilled and knowledgeable across a diverse range of specialisms. As one of the signatories of the manifesto we present below astutely proclaimed, ‘There are many ways to skin a rabbit’. We learnt through being assimilated into various programmes and participating within different pedagogic approaches. Our own holistic creative practice developed from cherry picking from the most inspiring and innovative teaching strategies whilst weaving in our own experiences from the industry we could see developing around us. Naturally we have also been challenged, frustrated and even concerned. Teaching and learning is a work in progress for all involved. Schemes of work devised with the best intentions do not always go to plan. A project brief which has brought forth the most imaginative work within one cohort can fall flat when delivered in exactly the same way with another group. Recognising the uniqueness of all those involved in the learning process is paramount. This is no less true of the dynamics at play within the teaching team. Our knowledge is informed by our experience and our specialisms and as any educator will verify, we do not all think, feel or hold the same convictions regarding both subject and modes of delivery. The spaces of learning are and should be rife with agonism. These frictions are entirely necessary, particularly when addressing a subject as chimeric as contemporary illustration.

**iii. Troublesome Knowledge**

To say that the ‘illustration industry is changing’ can seem somewhat platitudinous. What can be asserted 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. This is as exhilarating as is it destabilising. Writing in 2010, design writer and critic Rick Poynor highlighted what he described as ‘the missing critical history of illustration’ (Poynor 2010), acquainting much of the writing published about illustration as being ‘invariably how-to guides or visual surveys’. Provocatively posing the question of ‘How seriously should we take illustration?’ Poyner argued that such literature fails to engage in any analytical dialog and ultimately serves to undermine the discipline, conveying the impression that illustration is without need of ‘thoughtful consideration by writers …and that most illustrators aren’t sophisticated enough to want this anyway’. (Poyner 2010)

 Sharing similar sentiments within a review of Pick Me Up, the London based annual graphic arts fair, designer, educator and former illustration agent Lawrence Zeegan provocatively asked,

Where is the content? Where is the comment? It’s all about the materials, rather than the message. It’s all about the quantity rather than the quality. It’s all about design doing rather than design thinking. It’s all style over content, function following form. Illustration has withdrawn from the big debates of our society to focus on the chit-chat and tittle-tattle of inner-sanctum nothingness. (Zeegan 2012)

Writing in 2007 from the very particular position of a commissioning designer, Steven Heller pre-empted these concerns questioning the overall relevance of illustration, saying,

I want to know what illustration contributes today, if anything, that other art forms do not. In other words, what are illustrators saying through their work? How are they saying it? And if they are saying anything meaningful, are they pushing boundaries that need pushing? (Heller 2007)

This scrutiny, while troubling, is considered timely as parameters shift and manifestations become more experimental as illustrators encroach into territories more readily associated with other creative disciplines. The diminished state of professionally practiced illustration is particularly perturbing when we recall illustration once belonged to the wider, more critically-framed territory of graphic arts and/or design that developed in the twentieth century, a territory that still enjoys robust discourse about form, content, and cultural relevance. Illustration, meanwhile, may be to non-illustrators most familiar in its role of manifesting decorative or straightforward representational images, often commissioned by an external agent (its secondary status within professional hierarchies should be noted) to be employed within commercial contexts such as publishing, advertising, packaging, and so on. The illustrated image is too frequently defined as an accompaniment to text or written sources in print form, and rudimentary dictionary definitions still offer ‘illustration’ as ‘a picture illustrating a book, newspaper, etc.’ (Google 2018).

But now, changes within industry and the reduction of budgets and commissioning opportunities (Denis 2012; Vormittag 2014) has resulted in skilled practitioners seeking new ways to apply their abilities. Alongside new inventiveness, illustrators must also possess an intellectual rigour and criticality, as well as the confidence and vocabulary to articulate their decision making. Writing in direct response to Poyner’s criticism in an editorial of the *Journal of illustration* (2017), theorist and historian Jaleen Grove champions the theoretical and contextual turn within illustration education. Grove stresses, and we concur, that to neglect this development is tantamount to refusing illustrators the mantle of ‘intellectual’ (Grove 2017). Grove states that the ability to articulate critical analysis, explicitly in writing as well through imagery to public audiences, will not only establish the illustrator as intellectual but also serve to showcase the agency of the subject (Grove 2017).

 We recognise that within our role as educators it is our duty to facilitate broader expectations of our subject, particularly amongst undergraduate students who are so often in that first flourish of developing a practice. Critical questioning is to be expected as we, as illustrators, begin to examine our discipline-specific expertise and take the lead in producing autonomous content that may shift intention away from traditional transactional arrangements. The most pertinent line of questioning is not, as Heller asks, about what illustration contributes. Rather, we must ask, what *can* illustration contribute? And moreover, what is illustration today and how can it operate?

**iv. Uprising**

Works of art containing tropes of Illustration are visible throughout the history of art, yet the vocabulary to discuss illustration as an independent subject has been lacking among art experts. Regardless of whether illustration is considered an old or emergent discipline, what is certain is that it lacks the theoretical dialogue and close analysis established within counterpart creative movements such as art criticism, film theory, and media studies. While illustration can benefit from the discourses in these fields, however, too often illustration looks outside itself for rationalization and inspiration when it ought to work to develop its own critical tools.

 Illustration’s malleability, met with a lack of discipline specific discourse, often leads to it being described as interdisciplinary. As with all disciplines there is no one particular method, process, form or concern, but this does not mean illustration is inherently interdisciplinary and to describe it as such leaves illustrators insecure with no home to inhabit. Illustration has its own methods and strategies. These are not, as it were, ‘interdisciplinary’ (as in moving between various disciplines) but are specific to illustration practice. We are not separatists – we do not argue against cross pollination; all creative practices exercised with innovation are valid – but we argue that illustration carries signature methodologies with which it too can trade.

 From the ever-crystalline position we occupy as illustrator/teacher/practitioners, we recognise the need for a well-developed working definition for illustration practice and the illustration artefact. Illustrators must be equipped with a language through which to assert themselves and to enable a sense of identity and self-esteem.

 The development of illustration will only hasten as student numbers increase. This is certainly true concerning undergraduate courses in the United Kingdom. It is now that the intellectual dexterity championed by Grove (2017) is most urgently needed to ensure contemporary illustration practice can be described, explained and thus understood and recognised.

 When teaching a subject that is constantly at risk of being outmoded, it is paramount that we facilitate intellectual and technical as opposed to pecuniary or trophy-oriented ambition in the safety of the school environment in a way that will still have application within an increasingly precarious professional environment. What are most needed are transferable and adaptable skills that facilitate intelligent work that has a place and can be applied in real, tangible, albeit diverse, contexts. What is required for illustration is a signature pedagogy that acknowledges the historical functions while enabling students to realise and act upon the wider potential of illustration practice. Students are consistently the most valuable resource any educator can draw upon. The students we encounter constantly challenge our own understanding of the forms and concerns illustration can address, and confirm our position firmly as facilitators and not connoisseurs.

**vi. Illustration Research Methods**

Mireille and I observed that even with the increasing mutual feeling within our wider teaching network, there were still no texts on any of the generic course reading lists that articulated our burgeoning philosophy on how illustration should be discussed. Despite a concerted effort amongst the international academic community (notably the Illustration Research Network) to establish new benchmarks for the study of illustration, we recognised a serious shortfall in subject-specific critical discourse. With practice-based research being the mainstay of much of our approach to teaching we wanted to produce a text which paid particular attentions to the mechanisms of illustration. Too often emphasis of the illustrator’s work is placed on the finished artefact, stylistic decisions and/or message conveyed. In contrast, much of our time working with students focuses on developing the methods and processes of thinking and doing that will enable an intelligent, thoughtful and articulate body of work to be developed. In professional life the illustrator often has a methodology singular to their own practice that has been meticulously developed over time. These methods are usually tacit but are none-the-less rigorous and valid. This development process is rarely seen or valued outside the parameters of education. While the inclusion of preparatory work is embedded in assessment criteria, the true significance of this research stage is sometimes difficult for students to fully grasp and is regarded as superfluous to their ‘finished pieces.’ When neglected, however, the work invariably suffers. Yet what exactly is meant by ‘research’ often remains elusive, as it is as amorphous and distinctive to each individual project as it is to the practitioner. This can result with a creeping sense of uncertainty in understanding the rationale for gathering and processing information, particularly when holding tightly onto an overly simplistic definition of illustration as ultimately being concerned with image making.

 To answer our question – *what are the potentials for contemporary illustration? –* with our students, we need to understand illustration not as a secondary supplement to text, but as a creative discipline with the explicit ability to engage and communicate to mass and diverse audiences, particularly outside of the traditional settings for artworks.

 An idea I brought to Mireille was to craft a mode of analysis specifically for illustration research methodologies that would acknowledge that they are not only integral to the realisation of an illustration artefact but intrinsic within the holistic creative outcome. Rather than dwell on an illustration’s outcomes, we would address the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ that underpin the ways the most ambitious of illustration practices could operate and perform. To be able to understand and develop the subject we needed to unpack the processes through which an illustration is determined: the means of production, the rigorous processes and considerations, and the most seemingly miniscule of decisions.

We penned a proposal, set our agenda and were met with support by Bloomsbury Academic. At the time of writing we are still in the midst of the preparing our content. We have found our voice developing and our ethos strengthening.

**viii. Method**

As we began to consolidate our research in writing, an authoritative tone began to emerge that was more than redolent of a manifesto. We write firmly from the position of illustrator-educators recognising that education informs industry. Rather than simply voice from our soap boxes, it seemed the appropriate time to call back to our peers, ensuring the practices we were describing were relevant and supported by our wider community.

 We devised a questionnaire and emailed them to all those we recognised as having irrevocably informed our practices. Included on the list are educators working across all levels and specialisations, people with whom we have collaborated, taught alongside and shared long and impassioned conversations. Not all are illustration specialists; these people’s expertise is no less valuable as we are reaching out in recognition of a kinship and a shared vision.

We asked the following:

* What is the most common hurdle you recognise the students are facing and what is the most frequently imparted advice you offer?
* Are there particular theories, ideologies or criticisms, pedagogic or otherwise, you align with?
* What strategies for learning do you favour and why?
* What is the most inspirational teaching practice you have observed and why?

The responses were overwhelming in in their frankness and generosity. In carrying out this task we have equipped ourselves with a database of knowledge that we can turn to in needy moments – in this regard we have been selfishly strategic.

**vii. Manifesto**

The Manifesto for Illustration Pedagogy is intended as a resource for educators, practitioners and students alike. The manifesto form has the ability to articulate a group of voices rather than posit the views of the sole author, affirming its suitability to describe a set of ideas that we see growing from within the illustration community. Embracing both formal and informal knowledge, it gives equal weight to established pedagogic theory, contemplative discussions had in the faculty staff rooms and around board room tables, the familiar chats (and occasional rants) on the train journeys home as well as the ongoing debates and deliberations had with students. We wanted to encapsulate the excellent teaching practices, innovation, and ambition that we, as educators, have so greatly benefitted from whilst also establishing a voice for the sense of collectivism we have felt party to. Indeed, the art of making manifestos is also the art of appropriation (Danchev 2011); we have taken, revised and redistributed the knowledge that has been gifted to us by others.

 As illustration educators our role is to be at the forefront of championing the development and understanding of our subject. As Alex Danchev argues, ‘to make a manifesto is to imagine or hallucinate the Promised Land… it is in its own way a utopian project’ (2011).Yet the vision we describe is not utopic; it is an aspiration never realised. The future we describe is manifesting now, in what we recognise today. It is not just the possibility, but the actuality.

Placing an emphasis on illustration as a research methodology or a process rather than as an artefact or outcome means that we are not attempting to describe all facets of illustration practice and pedagogy. Instead weight is placed on rigour of method – a part rarely highlighted beyond the confines of education and research. Our intention is not to anchor a definition nor to be so arrogant to assume there can be a formulaic approach to teaching illustration. After all, a subject as dynamic as illustration requires suitably dynamic strategies through which to analyse it. What we do intend is to provide a framework for investigation; provoke rich conversations, and provide the space for speculation about what we intend to achieve through illustration.

 ‘To manifesto is to perform’ (Danchev 2011), so we invite others to animate, sing – no, *SCREAM –* out these words and make them their own. We hope this manifesto will evolve, become personalised by the individual or cohort, and adorn the walls of studios, bedsits, offices, community halls, libraries, civic buildings – wherever it is that the illustrators of the future find themselves working.

**The Manifesto for Illustration Pedagogy**

**Knowledges**

We acknowledge the following to be true and unequivocal of contemporary illustration practice:

* Illustration is not the image, the slogan or a product.
* Illustration cannot exist in isolation.
* Illustration comes full term through participation.
* Illustration thrives on a network of active collaborative relationships.
* Illustration lies dormant, without engagement much like a story told but unheard.

**Thresholds**

Refusal of these concepts will hinder the evolution of our discipline:

* The Illustrator can author.
* Illustration can be authorless.
* The illustrator shares responsibility for the messages they communicate. Power carries responsibility.
* Illustration outcomes are not associated with any specific medium.
* The risk-taking you fear will un-employ you will in fact have the opposite effect. Becoming a more individual thinker/maker will offer longer term benefits.
* Asking ‘will this work?’ is not an effective methodology.
* The gap between theory and practice is a wound. Investigations are always hybrid in nature, and take multiple forms, depending on the context and the mode required.
* Think deep. Start small, and add water. Depth can take all forms and be manifested through seemingly simple acts.
* Take something tiny from within the complexity of contemporary life; build outwards, adding layers, rather than start from the whole.
* Conceive through making.
* Do something simple, but do it really well.
* Production is research. Making will inform and expand ideas. Clarity comes from integration of making, reflection and evaluation of the outcomes.
* Show, don’t tell.
* Consider visual language over style. Styles go in and out of fashion. Language and style are two different things. Language is where we grapple with and constitute an individual grammar or syntax.
* Understand what within *your* language is a full stop, a paragraph, or an indent.

**Principals**

We declare the following as inherent mechanisms operating within contemporary illustration practice:

* Illustration is a collaborative discipline. It does not operate independently; it is made with the intent to engage. ‘Illustration’ is a result of participation.
* There is no way to be an isolated practitioner in this world. We all have to collaborate and goals need to be set as team goals.
* Illustration does not have to solve a problem; it can be diagnostic or discursive, prompt questioning, offer analysis, provide explanation or be used as a resource for future reference.
* Illustration is assimilated into popular culture and everyday experience. All have opportunity and most will have engaged with illustration. There are no specific places of encounter for illustration. Illustration is applied and belongs within everyday contexts.
* This accessibility serves to make illustration as a means of artistic expression tangible and less culturally elusive.

**Liberators**

We support one another to take creative risks necessary for achieving transcendence.

* Imagine the worst. Visualise failure.
* We all have different knowledge. It is all valid.
* Self-trust.
* Understand how to be yourself confidently and then engage with what you consider to be the ‘other’.
* Consider your position. Be open to broad references. No reference is too low- or high-brow.
* Find out what makes us different from one another. Nurture emotional intelligence.
* Illustration is fluid. There are no experts.
* Illustrators like metaphors: ‘cast your nets wide, and then sort the fish into buckets later.’
* Encourage the experiential accumulation of skills.
* Education is diagnostic. What’s stopping you?
* Enable. Self-organise. Negotiate.
* Start groups. Coordinate with others.
* Teach skills but leave space for individual response; your method needn’t be theirs.
* Chair and prompt. Take the lead in debating your ideas.
* Old technology is new technology if you’ve never used it before.
* Everything is your practice.

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