

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **COMMUNICATION DESIGN: INSIGHTS FROM THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES, DEREK YATES AND JESSIE PRICE (2015)**

London: Bloomsbury, 208 pp.,

ISBN: 9781472531674, p/bk, £29.99

*Reviewed by James Corazzo, Sheffield Hallam University*

Graphic Design has always been a discipline that eschews easy definition. A subject that is both everywhere and nowhere. Where consensus occurs, it is often about the discipline's *in-betweenness*: positioned somewhere between client and message, art and commerce or craft and concept. And if the position of the discipline appears blurry then the speed of change only adds to the confusion (and excitement) one encounters trying to make sense of contemporary graphic design: 'I have no idea what graphic design as a descriptor means anymore' said Jonathan Ellery, a graphic designer at Browns, '[t]he area it once inhabited has now become so blurred with other disciplines that a whole new world has opened up' (Ellery quoted in Twemlow 2006).

Anybody charged with making sense of this 'whole new world' of graphic design will be confronted with a messy and unfolding terrain where things rarely stay still long enough to map them. This challenging context marks out the ambition of Derek Yates' and Jessie Prices' book *Communication Design: Insights from the Creative Industries*. In it the authors set out to document new forms of emerging practice in graphic design, (or communication design as the authors refer to it) and how these new forms are being driven by an ensemble of forces including globalization, supercomplexity and rapid technological change, and in the process 'creating fundamental shifts in the way creative professionals work' (54). In short, they argue designers (and students) need to develop 'new skillsets' that go beyond simply giving form and include the ability to 'analyse, understand, clarify and define' (7) and to do so collaboratively.

The authors unpack these ‘new skillsets’ throughout the book using a combination of historical context, practitioner interviews and case studies, which is illustrated by an impressive array of contemporary communication design practices. The book is organized into seven themes: Brand, Experience, Conversation, Participation, Navigation, Advocacy and Critique. Each theme is divided into sections. Taking the Experience theme as an example (itself broken down into motion graphics, environment, play, touch and experiential marketing) it features a diverse range of projects including interactive window displays (AllofUS), design for healthcare environments (Vital Arts heart-warming work for Barts hospital), 2012 Olympic Games Audience Pixels, digital games (UsTwo’s mesmerizing *Monument Valley*), objects that bring digital and physical artefacts together (GFSmith by Field & Sea), cultural outputs exploring potential of print (Container) and experiential marketing (Nike+ system).

The thematic structure provides an opportunity for the engaged reader to identify differences and commonalities in emerging practices. For example, the interplay between digital and analogue and the importance of cross- and interdisciplinary approaches reoccurs throughout the book and the reader is shown how many of these projects are often initiated as much through experimentation as they are commissioned through clients.

As a book, *Insights* is exceptionally adept at handling what at first might appear as a set of disparate, and even atypical, communication design projects. By organizing the projects into coherent themes and framing them within broader socio-economic and cultural contexts, Price and Yates make a strong case for how ‘new paradigms’ are increasingly informing the changing role of the communication designer.

To those schooled in traditional segments of practice that have defined graphic design (e.g. packaging, editorial design, web design) the modes of practice featured in *Insights* could represent a bewildering landscape of possibilities. The book consigns terms like ‘editorial design’ and ‘web design’ to the language of the past (surely a good thing). And whilst *Insights* may not be breaking new ground in identifying the significant shifts in the context for communication design practice – many of these ideas are already in circulation – in assembling and curating over 50 examples of projects that show these shifts it makes a valuable contribution.

This strategy is likely to appeal to the book’s core audience: undergraduate communication design students. The writing is accessible, energetic and coated with just enough theoretical contexts for it to have significance in higher education. But it should be remarked that *Insights* will have a broader appeal too. It would sit equally well on the Amazon wish lists of further education, undergraduate and postgraduate students and design educators and practitioners. Of course those looking for a sustained discussion to inform their dissertation and practice will also need to look elsewhere to explore the issues in greater depth but *Insights* acts as a great primer.

*Insights* is clearly the product of considerable fieldwork and sustained conversations with a number of contemporary practitioners. The authors’ enthusiasm and passion for identifying emerging practices is one of the book’s strengths, but at times, perhaps also its weakness. Parts of the text seem to resonate with a hyperbole often associated with the brands many of these practitioners have helped shape; projects are not just projects they are ‘game-changing projects’. Elsewhere, much is made of how brands forge ‘consensual relationships’ with audiences, but what we are consenting to and why is not covered.

To be fair, *Insights* does give space to communication design focused on research and cultural production. Although rather than confronting communication design's often paradoxical relationship with the world, as both a tool for change and a tool for sustaining the way things are, the book remains agnostic. Yes, it features themes on advocacy and critique, but these are in the minority, although in some respects this reflects the current state of the field (or perhaps the clue was in the title 'Insights from the Creative Industries').

Although Dunne and Raby, featured in the critique section, have developed a critical practice in an academic context, this appears to be one of relatively few 'academic' contributions to the book. Yet academia continues to make practice-led contributions to the discipline in a range of areas such as design for health and its absence here arguably reinforces the notion of communication design practice existing *outside* academia. The book also overlooks the contribution of design education. A number of the practitioners featured are themselves graduates of design courses that have challenged dominant forms of practice in the creative industries. This point is implied but perhaps under-acknowledged. The book is, however, explicit that the 'new skillsets' required are not always well served by design education, although to talk about design education in such a heterogeneous way is not entirely helpful. These points, however, should be considered in the context of the author's intentions – to deliver a book that looks at and analyses a broad range of emerging practice. *Insights* is not after all purporting to be an 'academic' book or the work of research.

Instead, it does an excellent job of making sense of a fast-moving and at times confusing discipline. Perhaps the best way to describe *Insights* is as a way-finding device to help navigate the landscape of contemporary communication design practice. This makes it more than a useful book; this makes it an important book and one that deserves a space on the shelves' of communication design students, educators and practitioners.

## REFERENCE

Twemlow, A. (2006), *What is Graphic Design For?*, Hove: RotoVision.

### **METHOD MEETS ART: ARTS-BASED RESEARCH PRACTICE, 2ND ED., PATRICIA LEAVY (2015)**

New York: Guilford Press, 328 pp.,  
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As funders and assessors of research are seeking increasing evidence of impact, arts-based research approaches potentially offer a way to maximize the direct reach of research beyond the academy. Shrugging off the limitations of academic language and evading firewall-protected academic journals,

arts-based research, an umbrella term Leavy uses to denote a range of terms in the literature, including a/r/tography, art as enquiry, practice-based research and scholartistry, is fundamentally participatory, drawing individuals into the research process as well as soliciting a wider audience by exploiting those features that make creative outputs including fiction, film, music and visual arts central to a person's intellectual and emotional life.

In making research accessible, as with social sciences research, arts-based research purposefully works towards verisimilitude in rendering the complexity of lived experience, but its goal is also to encourage empathy to effect individual and social change. Audience response is not just a matter of 'going public' with research, therefore, but of working towards transformation and problem-solving. It is this definition of impact that underpins Leavy's new argument in this second edition of *Method Meets Art*. For Leavy, arts-based research is not just a set of emerging methods within qualitative research but an alternative research paradigm in itself.

The book builds on the arguments made in the 2009 first edition to provide a rich introductory text for those new to arts methods for undertaking social research. After an overview, subsequent chapters consider narrative enquiry and fiction-based research, poetic enquiry, music as method, dance and movement enquiry, theatre, drama and film, and finally the visual arts. This reflects a deliberate trajectory into arts-based research, beginning with those forms of artistic output most familiar to the text-based traditions of social sciences research through more abstract modes such as dance and music to the visual arts. Also new to this edition is a chapter on evaluation criteria for arts-based research that asks how we can assess the role of, for example, aesthetic quality in judging arts-based research. The answer, Leavy proposes, is that artistic output cannot be useful if it does not have the artistic power to engage its audience within its own form but nevertheless the research purpose must always override the artistic purpose.

In working towards this, each chapter provides a succinct summary of the specific issues of each art form, as well as pedagogic features such as checklists, discussion questions and activities, an annotated list of suggested further readings and websites as well as exemplars of research in each art form, some, for obvious reasons given the range of art forms discussed, available online only. While the book is not a how-to-guide, each chapter offers a clear survey of the theoretical and practical considerations in undertaking arts-based research for a readership familiar with qualitative research questions and modes of enquiry but new to the potential of arts-based practices.

For a novice to arts-based research, Leavy's suggestion that a qualitative researcher and an artist share comparable aims in their work – to illuminate and help draw out the meaning from other people's experience through creativity, intuition and sensitivity – is a powerful account of the human realities of undertaking social research rarely acknowledged in methods texts or research outputs. From this perspective a researcher is already engaged in a form of artistry as they interpret, hone and re-present the lives of others in their work. Arts-based research, however, enables a researcher not only to work in collaborative and participatory ways with their research participants and intended audience but also to re-engage with fundamental, often ethically charged, aspects of their own researcher identity and the slippery notion of truth and truthfulness in social research. In this account of arts-based research, social researchers can make use of a set of artistic methods at some or all phases of social research during data generation, analysis, interpretation

or representation. As both a sociologist and fiction writer, Leavy argues that this paradigm of research has allowed her to bridge the researcher-self and the artist-self. While this move from researcher to artist is prompted by a desire to find more accessible and authentic ways to understand and communicate human experience, as this book's title makes clear, what the book does not aim to do in any depth is explore how an artist might seek to reframe his or her artistic practice as research within the traditional structures of the academy.

The overarching argument of the book that arts-based research is a new paradigm rests on several distinctive features of arts-based research that are drawn out in the concluding chapters. Leavy summarizes these features in a table in the final chapter, and while some of the ways of distinguishing between qualitative and arts-based research are finely drawn and less persuasive for that – for example, by differentiating between words (qualitative) and stories, images, scenes (arts-based research) or between writing (qualitative) and (re)presenting (arts-based research) – three principles stand out as essential for understanding how arts-based research might constitute its own paradigm or at the least expand our understanding of qualitative methods in productive ways.

First, unlike other qualitative methods, arts-based methods do not focus on eliciting and collecting data but are acts of data generation, of co-constructing meaning between researcher and participant. Art-based modes allow for ambiguity and multiplicity of interpretation. Second, the purpose of arts-based research is to effect change in both participants and the audience of the research as part of the act of research whether that be consciousness-raising, individual transformation or political action. While many qualitative researchers would hope that their research might change practice or inform policy, arts-based research, Leavy argues, is premised on audience response. Meaning is made at the point of engagement and this is a powerful argument for making research open to a wider audience. Finally, where qualitative research is interdisciplinary, arts-based research moves us towards methods that are transdisciplinary in ways that may foster new ways of thinking freed from traditional disciplinary constraints. For those readers familiar with the well-rehearsed distinctions between positivist and interpretative paradigms, what this book helpfully illuminates are some of the assumptions and values that can make traditional qualitative methods sometimes less than satisfactory and encourage us to see anew the ways we already work as artists in crafting research and the need for greater reflexivity on the purpose and ethical value of our work.