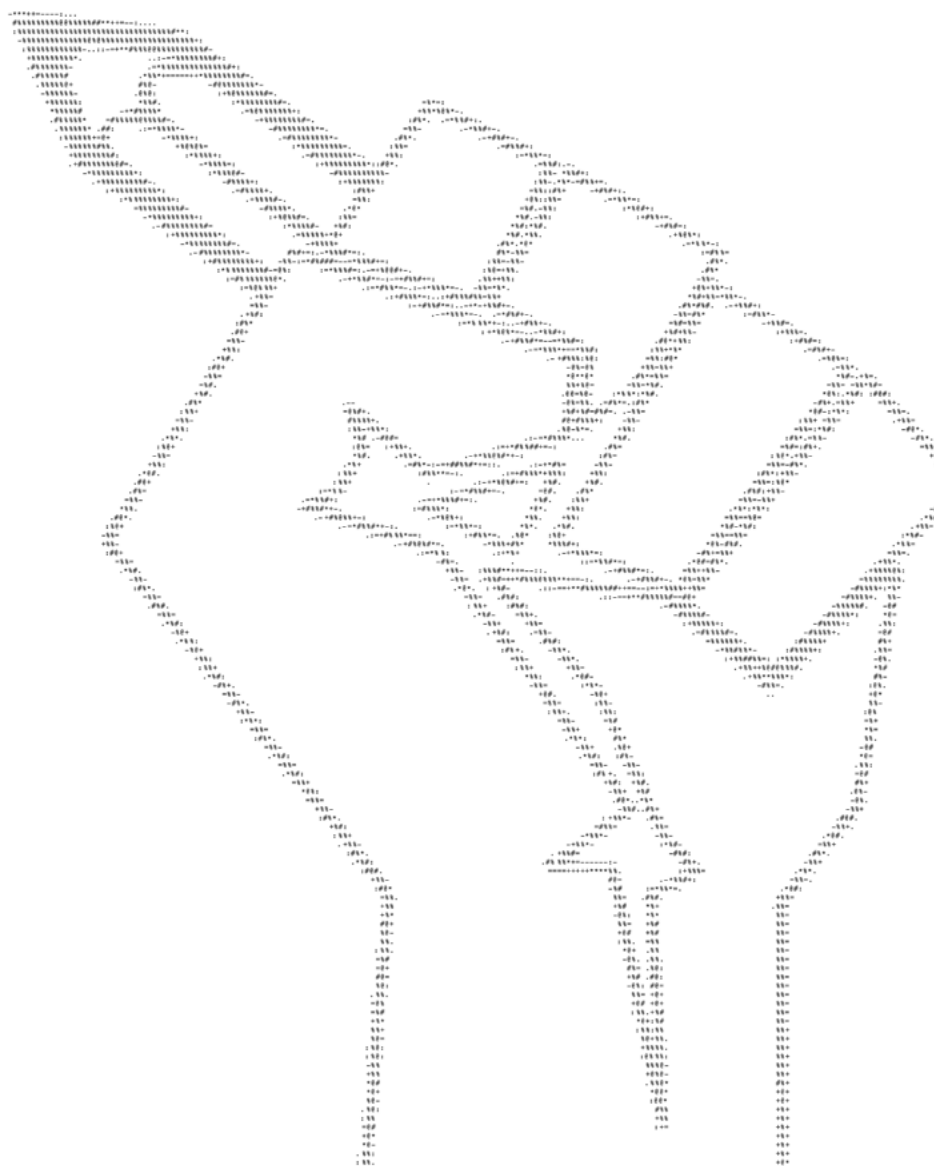


TURNING THE SWORD AGAINST ITS MASTER



Laconic **Critical Report**
Graphic Communication Design

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INTRODUCTION

I cannot think of a more suitable word to describe the corporate frenzy of graphic design than *tartuffe* (appearing as moral to deceive others of your dishonest intentions). One of my greatest fears is to be abducted by these companies to cremate my own soul and use bright colours combined with geometric patterns to coerce the middle class into consuming from them. Influenced by the 1980s postmodern art collective The Memphis Group these corporations use this aesthetic to whitewash the real injustices, whilst attempting to appear as fluid, inclusive and in line with the current stage of postmod-

ern identity politics. As Walter Benn Michaels said, "What makes identity politics appealing to the neoliberal imagination is that it's perfectly compatible with inequality." (Michaels, 2006).

I continue steering my ship as far away from this island as possible, taking a world view fundamentally based around ownership in economics and its all-encompassing implications. I use design to translate my economic philosophy into a more digestible accessible form in hopes of raising awareness and circumventing the ideological framework we've all internalised.

The power of design reaches far beyond the surface level aesthetics; design is a language. Just like you and I subconsciously translate various chemical and electrical signals into dialect, we can use design in the same way as a form to carry the same content. This is a form that I believe holds value in bypassing the stigma of complexity and elitism surrounding economic ideas. Throughout this critical report I will delve into my design practice exploring my influences and ideas in relation to the wider context of design.

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THE DESIGNERS DILEMMA

“The role of a designer is complex and often contradictory, as we find ourselves complicit in systems we aim to critique or change.”

(Pater, 2021) This quote from Ruben Pater’s CAPS LOCK reflects the tension within designers who want to create change, but whether they like it or not find themselves drawn in on the fishing line they were hooked onto the day they entered this field. Despite the drive for a profound effect,

by the nature of capitalism we are reeled into creating work for profit not purpose. I find myself in a constant battle mirroring that of Gordon Comstock’s in Orwell’s *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (Orwell, 1936). Throughout the novel Gordon expresses his distaste for advertising and remains reluctant to working in the industry. Albeit he eventually succumbs to the pressure and can now partake in civil society, signified by marrying the love of his life. My fear for this reality grows day by day, creating work that exists in opposition to capitalism is surprisingly enough not valued too highly on the market.

Thankfully this alone doesn’t stop me, as although there may not be a demand for it, I believe there is a need for it. My ideas stem from a Marxian school of thought, viewing society through the lens of class struggle with the belief that economic structures play a huge role in shaping not only political, cultural and social life but also our perception of these. I bought this into my Unit 6 work in which I was observing the concrete social relations in the opulent area of Knightsbridge, Taking Inspiration from the Situationist international’s theory of a *dérive* (Debord, 1956). This idea developed as I researched

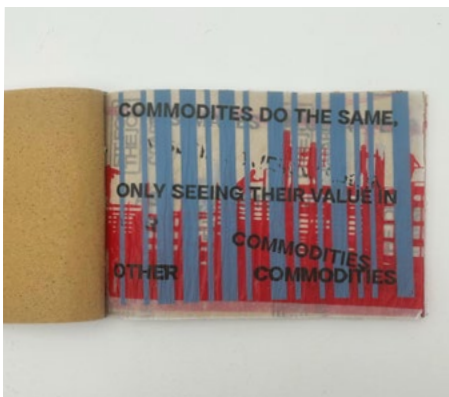


Fig 1

into the concept of commodity fetishism (Marx, 1867), value appearing as inherent to commodities, disregarding the role of labour. Throughout the project I was exploring how the commodity form abstracts us from the social relations between workers and owners, translating this into

design. Hans Haacke’s work *Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System* (Haacke, 1971) was highly engaging to me; exposing the exploitative nature of real estate ownership and its effects that often go under the radar. The power of his design is evident by the Guggenheim Museum cancelling the planned 1971 exhibition in which this piece was due to be shown; a defining moment in highlighting the influence of economics and politics on culture. Although this approach to political design fascinates me, I choose often to work with the unquantifiable. Data can evoke an immediate response

but often not much more due to its nature of abstracting from the human experience. I want to incite thought and reflection to inspire new views of the world. Along the lines with Stuart Hall’s essay *Encoding/Decoding* (Hall, 1973) I believe the individual is not merely a passive receiver of information but an active participant in its interpretation. I take this into all my work, frequently using analogies and open-ended questions to provoke thought. Hearing feedback and self-reflecting taught me to place great importance on the individual using their own mind to engage and form their own view.

MATERIALS & MEDIUMS

My approach to Unit 6 revolved around using design to convey an image of production in society, showing the veiled social relations behind commodities. Utilising both allegories and abstracted imagery to prompt contemplation. I wanted to represent the idea of a mystified concealed reality resulting from the commodity form, using translucent acrylic paint and emphasising layers. I am curious about the use of materials in being able to communicate a story concurrently with design. I experimented with this in my Unit 6 outcome, screen-printing on a gritty resilient sandpaper as well as a very thin fragile

reality. The complex nature of my work puts me in a continual predicament of saying too much and devaluing the power of design, or risking my ideas not being understood due to the oversimplifying visuals. Throughout my design process I am always trying to place myself in the shoes of the audience, continually questioning and iterating until I'm confident the idea is accessible in its new form. Understanding the relationship between a design's medium, form, content, and purpose is something I have learnt to value deeply through experience. I designed and self-published a book last

glassine paper. It is fascinating for the story to be told through touch as well as visuals, with the materials existing in complete contradiction displaying the social relations and the literal friction that this causes. Growing up in a world where graphic communication is so incessantly online, I see printmaking as an escape grounded in the fundamentals of design. Screen printing as a medium is known for its bold visual impact and ease of reproducibility, making it a long-used tool for political activism.

"At the same time across the world, you saw the Situationist International protesting in the 1968 uprising by day and screen printing by night, as Emory Douglas was screen printing revolutionary artwork for the Black Panther Party."

In line with Walter Benjamin's idea that "The role of art in the age of mechanical reproduction is to create new modes of perception, which can bring about radical change in society" (Benjamin, 1935), I use printmaking not as just a visual technique but as a reproducible critique of



Fig 2

year titled LACONIC – a collection of visual designs I created daily over the previous year complimented by some short essays and poems I had written. I grew massively as a communicator through this two-year process; however, I was met with great feelings of disillusionment. Months

later writing this report I am aware of why I was feeling this in the following weeks after the launch. I don't create my work to be told 'wow that looks great', my emphasis is on the content and the form is more of a vessel that engages the audience and conveys the message. With the medium of a book, especially an artistic book I think the message is often overlooked and the visuals receive too much focus. I learnt from this process that with my desire to evoke thought and discussion through design I need to use mediums that slap this in the audiences face harder and quicker than an art book. With

MATERIALS & MEDIUMS

this in mind, I started two projects both centred around using public spaces as a canvas to communicate my ideas as accessibly as possible: utilising both unostentatious phrases and eye-catching assertive visuals to communicate the desired message. I found these projects were



Fig 4

acclaim; challenging audiences to think critically rather than admire passively.



Fig 3

much closer to realising my intentions. Watching people walk past, stop to look and read made me feel far more accomplished than any other work. These projects revealed that my practice is far more centred around effective meaningful communication rather than mere aesthetic

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THE PRICE OF VISIBILITY

To understand who I design for requires understanding why I design. I design to communicate critical ideas that disrupt and provoke contemplation, hoping to open new perspectives on the prevailing economic framework. By its very nature what I communicate is to be shared with all. In fact, the purpose of my work can only be fulfilled when its ideas are communicated across all walks of life, and we as society can organise with our collective strength to create change. As I touched on earlier in this report, I realised with my project LACONIC that by designing in the form of an art book I was greatly

limiting who I was communicating to. I don't want to only communicate to people interested in arts or books; I want to communicate to everyone. I returned to the streets with art in the public sphere to be seen by everyone and communicate to all different types of people, unified by the need to labour to live. One thing unifying us all is that we must labour to reproduce our life. A challenge I continue to face is how I get people to see and take notice of my work. Street art is great for this with the sheer volume of possible viewers; however, many people quickly dismiss graffiti as not being 'real art' and

don't look for any insight in it. An alternative I tried recently was leaving my screen-printed artwork on public transport across the city, signed by myself with a note saying, "Please take me". Some got taken, some got trampled on, some I watched get cleared away by TFL staff seconds after I put them out. I have also experimented with replacing public transport ads with my own work in critique of the advertising industry. There is no simple option here. It is the biggest challenge I find myself continually facing. It would be easy to say, "nothing works" and then sit back and setup an Etsy shop to sell beautiful



Fig 5

art prints with buy one get one free deals. No single billboard, poster or piece of street art changes the world. In line with the ideas of modern artist Ai Weiwei (Weiwei, 2023), one image may not liberate the people, but many images become the voice of the people. Together, they tell a story that

cannot be ignored. No design exists in a vacuum. Everything adds to our collective consciousness, slowly but surely raising awareness of the issues at hand. Keeping this in mind helps me to stay encouraged. I deeply admire art collectives such as LedByDonkeys for their impactful use of public spaces to achieve significant success in political activism. Through their use of video projections on institutional landmarks such as the houses of parliament they garner worldwide attention, disrupting and serving as a resistance to the highly concentrated ownership of media. Presenting work

in public spaces has more meaning than just a wider audience. It directly challenges the idea of private ownership, at the same time attempting to act as a resistance to the commodification of art as a privately owned asset for the wealthy to play with. However, it's no surprise the system that commodifies everything has even commodified its own critique. A clear example can be seen by many of Banksy's works being stolen from public spaces to be sold to private owners. Rebellion becomes commercialised, with cultural uprisings like the Punk era being turned into a consumable trend, or the

THE PRICE OF VISIBILITY

fight against climate change becoming a marketing strategy for corporations. The paradox of art and design as a communicative form for societal critique, and just another means for profit generating, situates me in a very challenging position. I often find myself thinking that to make my ideas visible requires a counter-intuitive commercialisation whether via art galleries or corporate design to reach a wider audience; however, I am also aware that this may jeopardise the integrity of my ideas that critique that very same system. Going forward I am unsure how I will manage this tension; whichever route I take my practice in I want to be sure to stay true to my core beliefs.

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CONCLUSION

Reflecting on my practice throughout this critical report has shaped a deeper understanding of my personal theory of design and my creative process. Acknowledging the inherent contradictions of being an anti-capitalist designer in an industry that is integral to the accumulation of capital is paramount to comprehending my work. As the revolting soldier turns the same sword once used to protect his master against him, I wield design against the very system it was built to serve. The value of my work stems from transmitting complex theoretical depth into a more easily comprehensible form. Weaving this

critical analysis into palatable design that exists in the public domain is an essential part of historical progress. As clichéd as it sounds my practice is positioned in the field of socially conscious design, contributing an academic economic perspective to the creative field. Writing this text has increased my awareness of the tensions at play within my practice; if you know you're lost you are one step closer to being found. My practice will always be in a conflict between maximising reach and maintaining purpose; my job is to steer this ship through the waters, in hopes of a turning tide. A ship driven by fire

has the potential to be the opposition's greatest threat, however it also carries the risk of its own destruction. Taking my practice forward I will continue to expand my understanding of economics and philosophy whilst bettering my communicative design skills. I want to bring scale and size into my practice to become more disruptive and emphasise the importance of our economic understanding. Increasing the reach of my work can also be nurtured by a focus on consistency; through a more cohesive visual language and regularly producing then sharing work to keep it in people's minds.

Only time will tell how successful my practice is. Capitalism has long weaponised design to serve its insatiable expansion; the real task is to liberate design as a vehicle for resistance, paving the way to our freedom. As Leonard Bernstein said "The point is, art never stopped a war and never got anybody a job. That was never it's function. Art cannot change events. But it can change people" (Bernstein, 1972).

PRINTED OUTCOME



Fig 6
Screen print
64 x 90 cm
Newsprint

PRINTED OUTCOME



Fig 7

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Fig 1, My Unit 6 Experience & Environment Outcome

Fig 2, My Self Published Art Book Titled 'Laconic'

Fig 3, My Project Titled 'Economics Explains', A Series of Paste-Ups Across London

Fig 4, My Project Titled 'Use of Man by Man', A Graffiti Project During Notting-Hill Carnival

Fig 5, My Project Titled 'Live to Love & Love to Shop', Replacing Advertisements on TFL

Fig 6, Photography of My Unit 5 Outcome in a Studio

Fig 7, Photography of My Unit 5 Outcome in the Open Studio