

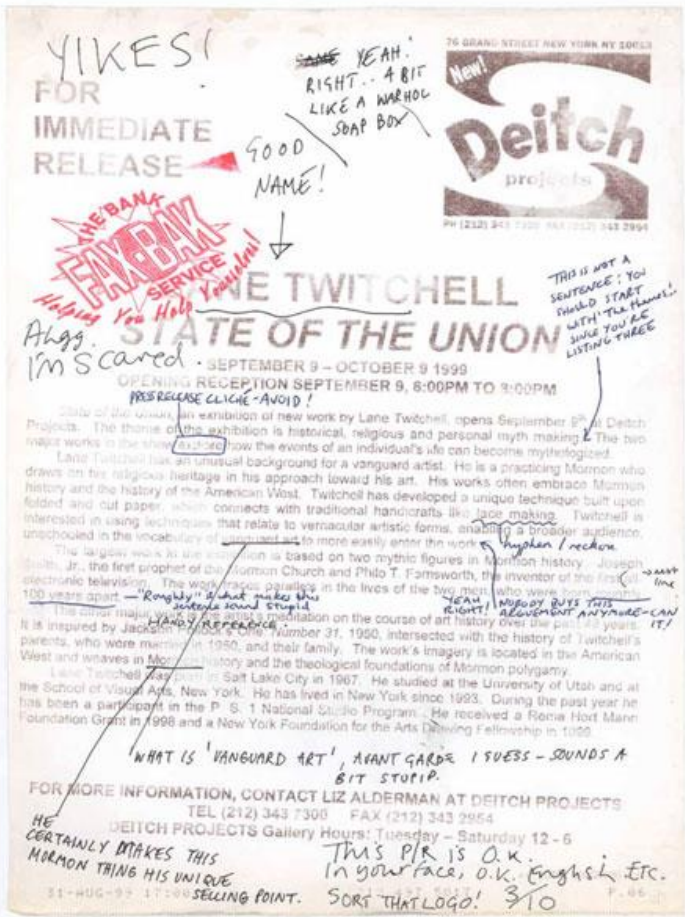
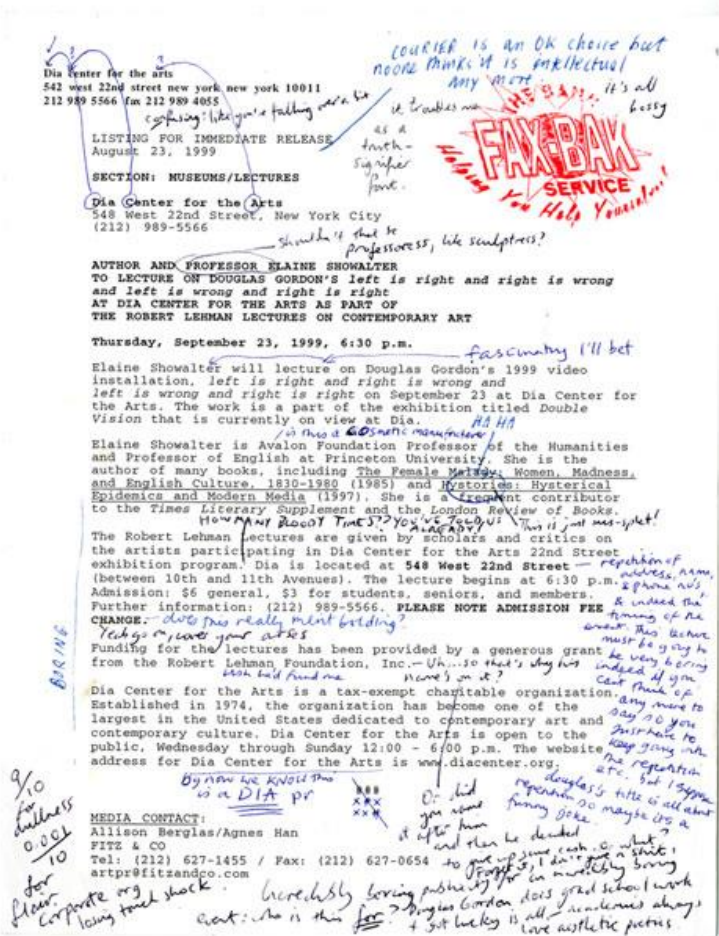
Writing that works: What is the role of Contextual and Theoretical Studies in design education?

Rujana Rebernjak

Writing that works: Project Context

Contextual and Theoretical Studies (CTS) is a core part of the student’s journey in art and design education.

- Why now? Need to address the awarding gap in CTS and a perceived (not always supported by data!) low attainment



Annotation as a form of critical practice: BANK, Fax-Back service, 1999

Writing that works: Project Context

- Perceived split between “theory” and “practice”, “studio” and “seminar room”, “making” and “writing”
- Legacy of Coldstream reforms in the 1960s: academic skills and theory ‘legitimizing’ art and design education
- In this view, CTS seen as an unwanted add-on to studio practice: a view that still persists today

“The idea of ‘rigour’ in art and design education has historically been aligned with CCS, as though this ‘academic’ element holds art and design afloat within the education system”

- Rintoul, J. (2017) *Integrating critical and contextual studies in art and design*, pp.XXI-XXII

Writing that works: Why writing?

- Writing as primary mode of assessment of CTS-related units and learning
- Lockheart: re-reading of Coldstream reports – suggests the emphasis on writing is a misunderstanding
- Writing can range in form/format and length, beyond the ‘academic essay’ and ‘dissertation’: some exploration of this was done through the Writing PAD project



Michael Taussig, I Swear I Saw This, 2011

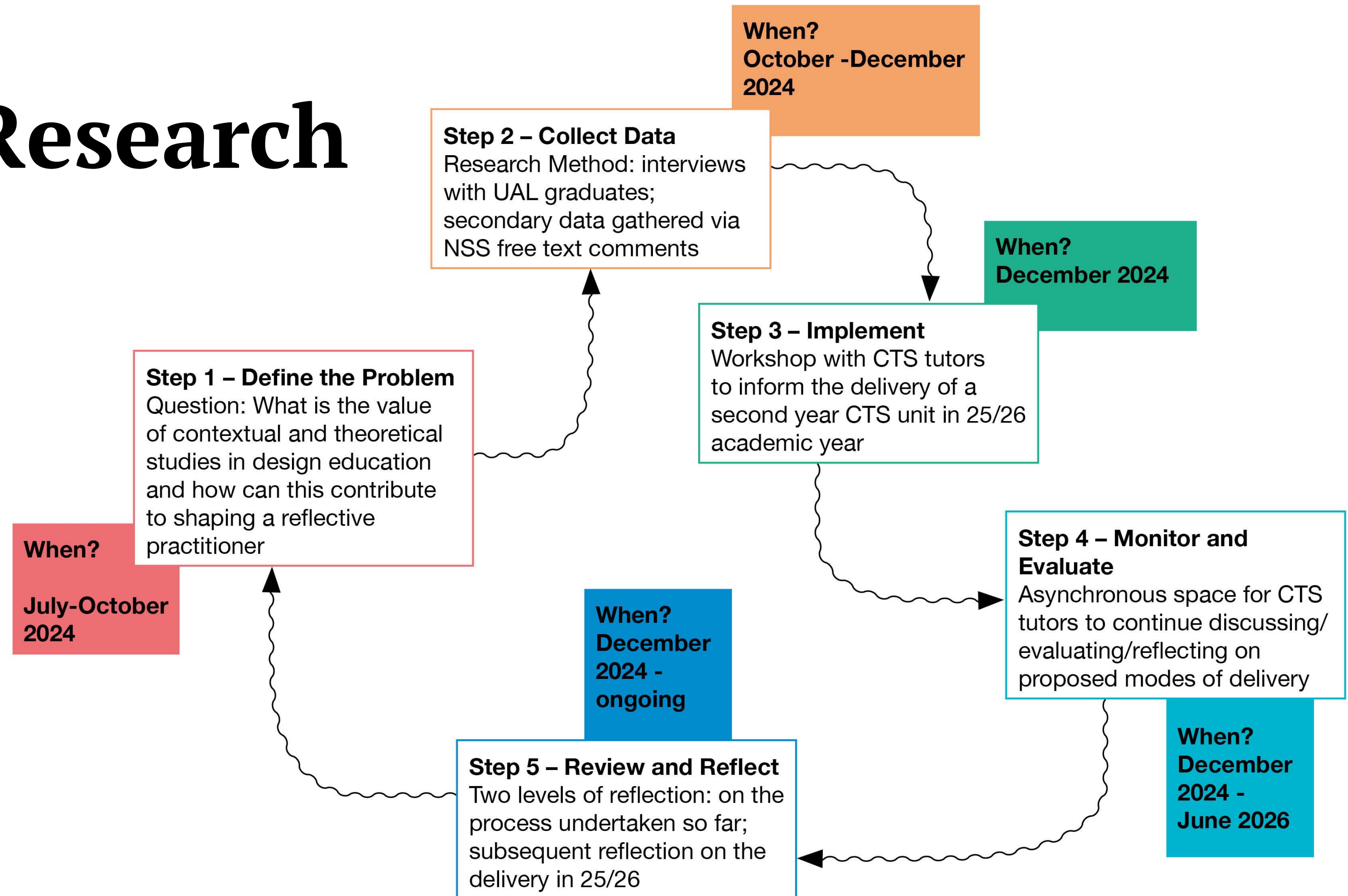
Writing that works: Research Questions

- What is the role and value of Contextual and Theoretical Studies in Design education, as seen from the perspective of design graduates?
- How can CTS contribute to shaping critical and reflective practitioners, sensitive to the political, cultural and historical context of their work?
- How does this relate to the contemporary neoliberal university?

“there has been throughout their long history, a constant tension between the practical ends which society thinks it is furthering by founding or supporting universities, and the ineluctable pull towards open-ended enquiry which comes to shape these institutions over time [...] what is most distinctive, and perhaps distinctively valuable, about what universities do is precisely what cannot be captured by the metrics societies increasingly use to measure value.”

- Collini, S. (2017) *Speaking of Universities*, p.25

Action-Research Process



Primary Research: Interviews

Interviewee 1	Course: BA Graphic and Media Design	Graduated in 2022/2023 AY	In full-time employment in the UK in a design agency
Interviewee 2	Course: BA Graphic Branding and Identity	Graduated in 2022/2023 AY	Currently doing a paid internship at an important design agency in London (7 months)
Interviewee 3	Course: BA Design for Art Direction	Graduated in 2023/2024 AY	Currently doing an MA course at Sotheby's Institute
Interviewee 4	Course: BA Interaction Design Arts	Graduated in 2021/2022 AY	Currently teaching as an AL at LCC and running their own practice

- Interviewed 4 UAL graduates through a semi-structured interview approach.
- Each interview lasted for around 30mins and was conducted via MS Teams
- Had a few core questions and a series of follow-up questions.
- The key question was:
“Looking back, what was the purpose of CTS within your degree?”

Primary Research: Interviews

- Respondents offered a nuanced view of CTS: instrumentalising it in the context of their work in the industry, but also recognising the intangible value it brings

“One of the best things about CTS was [...] that you had to question everything and make your opinion out of it.”

“now that that you ask me about it [...] a lot of how I look for things [...] even how I ask ChatGPT... I learned how to do this thing at CTS. But I don't necessarily think of it as like, oh, I learned this specific thing from CTS. It's more about how I view the world.”

*quotes edited for clarity

Primary Research: Interviews

- They also all questioned or disregarded the value of writing as a transferrable skill, and emphasised research and criticality as the core value of CTS

“it's about knowing what periods are like and how design is seen in the world [...] that you don't necessarily need when you're applying for jobs but are kind of very essential when you're actually doing real work with real clients. [...]

it's a lot about how you relate and refer to things [...] understanding what you're working on, on a deeper level, than writing per se...”

*quotes edited for clarity

Primary Research: NSS Data

Course	Comment	N. of responses
2023/2024		
DfAD	"We definitely didn't have any theoretical lessons, which made the course feel like we could do anything without making much sense, mostly if they are supposed to be preparing you to face the outside industry world. It is a shame since the projects are exciting, but there is no base or no logic to sustain all of it. [...] There is no reading list or encouragement to do so. All were very independent and figuring things ourselves."	18 (21)
DM	"CTS do not make sense"	3 (15)
DM	"During third year, the way in which the dissertation and the final project are organised is very poor. The overlapping of the two makes it difficult to accomplish both projects well. I was not able to finish writing my dissertation due to this."	4 (15)
DM	I do agree that Final Major Project and Dissertation from CTS runs simultaneously Collective feeling from students is that it is extremely stressful and they cannot dedicate appropriate time to the Final Major Project. Mental health was drastically impacted after the submission of CTS, thus reinforcing the inappropriate simultaneous projects. CTS2 was terrible and badly organised. I hate the atmos[here that the department and unit created for students. Lack of support and universal materials. I complained to the department and they answered that it was up to each tutor's pedagogy. Tutors should provide the same level of teachiing and materials to students; otherwise some students have a paerceived unfair advantage. CTS department does not acknowledge feedback and sweep student complaints under the carpet.	5 (15)
DM	"The markings are not done with consideration to those who engage more with the course than others. The CTS course is extremely biased and non-conclusive to the brief. Feedback and marking is largely contradicting the tutorials done with professors. The criteria marking are inconsistent with the final feedback. The CTS course should be reassessed and re-evaluated as it is largely effective for one's final grade. The subjects explored in this unit are either done on the subjects that students would like to explore or the subjects of which the tutors would like to hear/read about; it is never both."	13 (15)
DM	"The teachers are defitely the best part. And the freedon of choice for choosing topics of research."	15 (15)
GBI	"Not much support for CTS, very independent which I think would've been difficult for international students whose first language isn't English and/or haven't studied these theories or topic before."	25 (45)
GBI	"Wished to be taught the technical (using software) and more theory history background on the topics."	45 (45)
GMD	Positive: "The dissertation course"	4 (60)
GMD	"I wish the university taught some more in terms of hard skills, like software and I think also some of the basics, like diving into some of the history and some stuff like calissery [sic]."	22 (60)
GMD	"Adding course specific theoretical framework should drastically increase the quality of the student's engagement, satisfaction, learning and overall course quality." "the course gives no historical, cultural or theoretical classes regarding the topic of study. It only engourages experimentation and curiosity, which, although extremely important and appreciated, do not serve to give a complete picture of the study."	42 (60)

- Gathered data from 2022/2023 and 2023/2024 AY NSS free text comments available via UAL dashboards
- Useful for comparison: how students perceive CTS (or CTS-related aspects of their course) while they are still studying vs. once they graduate
- Several comments indicate the desire for more historical and theoretical sessions to be included in their student journey
- Limited data available – a reflection on the position of CTS within the course/curriculum or how the data is gathered?

Research intervention: Staff Workshop

:Padlet

Rujana Rebernjak + 1 • 23d

Design Cultures - Planning

Themes

+

Rujana Rebernjak /student/
24 days ago

Add in this sections any ideas you have for the themes/options you'd like to run as part of Design Cultures.

♥ 0 💬 1

Rujana Rebernjak /student/
23 days ago
Write your name somewhere if posting anonymously.

+ Add comment

Dene October /student/
23 days ago

Design Writing / Writing Design

Writing as design and about design.

Understanding the intersection of language and design, in the mediation of design, in the design

Delivery Model

+

Rujana Rebernjak /student/
24 days ago

Add here any ideas about the delivery model. The unit runs for 10 weeks, with the submission in Week 11.
5 weeks before Easter, 5 weeks after the break

The sessions will be up to 4hrs long (but could also be 3 + 1hr resource/lecture/etc.)

Some thoughts to consider:
Should we continue with asynchronous resources?
Do we want to run multiple themes - one before and one after the break?
Do we want to do online lectures (like PPU does) followed by seminars in person?
Do we want to front-load the 'content' and focus on assignment

Assessment

+

Rujana Rebernjak /student/
24 days ago

There are three components to the assessment:
2000-word essay
documentation of research journey (format TBC)
annotated bibliography

Add here any thoughts you have on assessment, some things to consider:

What kind of formative assessment would be useful?
What format would the research documentation take (blog? visual summary-style? a PDF presentation?)
What might the annotated bibliography look like?

♥ 0 💬 0

+ Add comment

Unit Outline

+

Rujana Rebernjak /student/
23 days ago

xxx : Design Cultures (Mandatory)	
Unit Code	TBC
Unit Title	Design Cultures
PHQ Level	Level 5
Effective From	September 1st 2024
Credits	20
Programme	University of the Arts (UAL)
Unit introduction	Design is a key aspect of contemporary life, shaping and moulding our everyday experience, from social media to transportation systems, from food to high-rise apartments, from music videos to online banking services. With design permeating nearly all aspects of our everydayness, it is important to develop critical approaches in understanding the multifaceted relationship between people, environment and designed artefacts.

DOCX

Design-Cultures-V4-Feb-2024 (3)

♥ 0 💬 0

+ Add comment

Anything else?

+

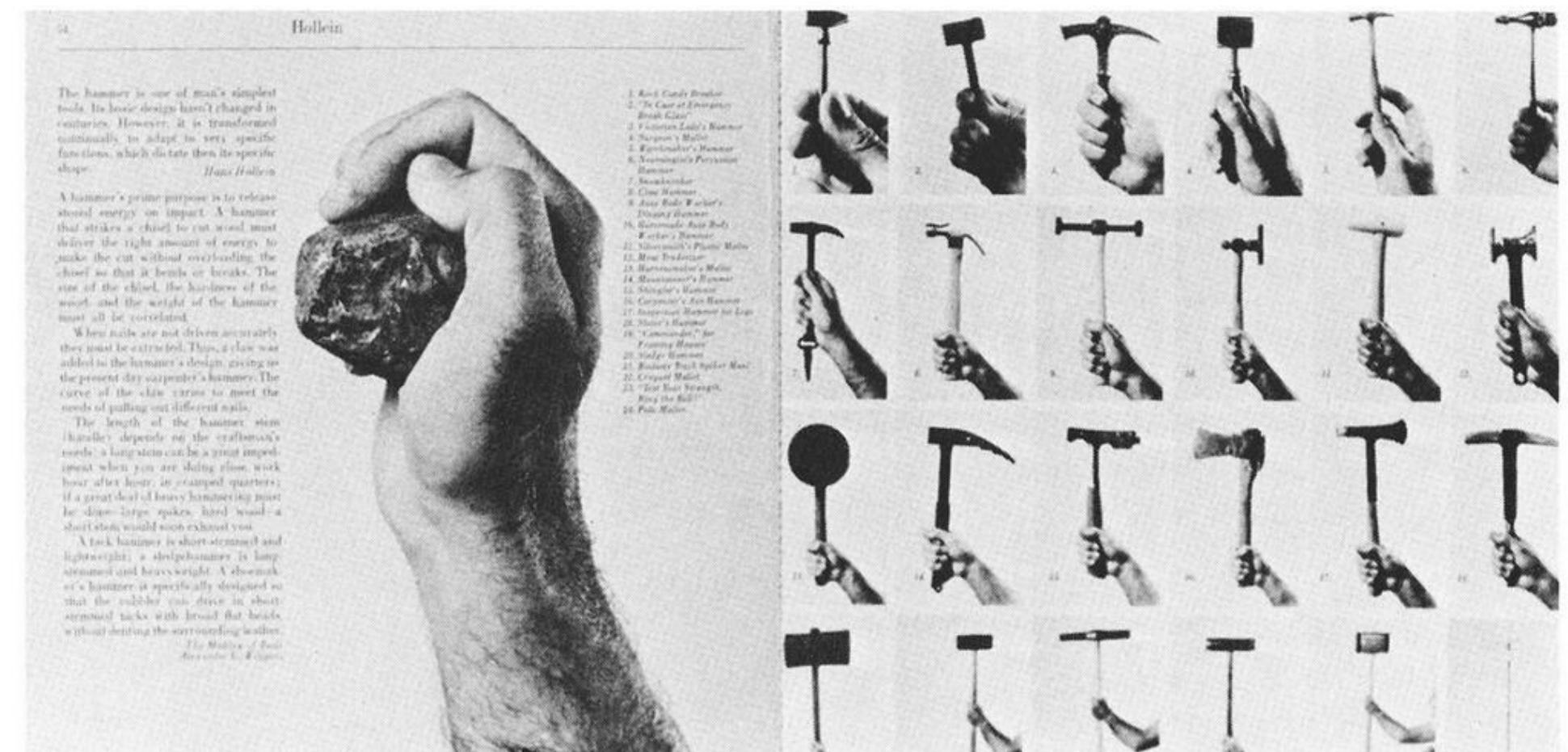
Project Outcome: Writing doesn't work?

- Question the value of 'academic writing': what are students able to demonstrate through the academic essay that they cannot through other forms?
- **Writing is a form of practice:** students need to practice different forms of communicating their learning which currently does not have the necessary space in the curriculum.
- What is the purpose of CTS in the curriculum and how is academic writing serving that purpose?
- **Make the 'work' of CTS visible** to 'demonstrate' its value within a design degree through more public sharing and highlighting the 'productive' links between studio and theory – highlight long-term impact of CTS learning

What is writing that works?

“artistic ‘knowledge’ can be located at the intersection of theory and practice, whereby ‘intuitive’ decisions in the creative process are actually manifestations of expertise and the experience of learning, applying and rehearsing skill. [...] The lack of a common language to articulate such knowledge or ‘wisdom’ renders it susceptible to being hidden or muted. Perhaps it is the attempt to articulate such knowledge and wisdom that opens up the possibilities of it having a voice.”

Rintoul, 2017, p.31



Hans Hollein, Man Transforms, 1976

References

- Alvesson, M. (2012) ‘Views on Interviews: A Skeptical Review’, *Interprting Interviews*. London: SAGE
- Borg, E. (2007), ‘Writing in fine arts and design education in context’, *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, 1:1, pp. 85–101
- Collini, S. (2017) *Speaking of Universities*, London: Verso
- Francis, P. (2009) *Inspiring Writing in Art and Design: Taking a Line for a Write*. Bristol: Intellect.
- Gray, C. and Malins, J. (2016) *Visualising Research: A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design*. London and New York: Routledge
- Irvine, A, Drew, P., Sainsbury, D. (2012) ‘Am I not answering your questions properly?’ Clarification, adequacy and responsiveness in semi-structured telephone and face-to-face interviews. *Qualitative Research* 13 (1), 87-106.
- Kara, H. (2015) *Creative Research Methods in the Social Sciences: A practical guide*. Bristol: Policy Press
- Lockheart, J., Edwards, H., Raein, M., and Raatz, C. (2004) ‘Writing Purposefully in Art and Design (Writing PAD)’, *Art Design & Communication in Higher Education*, 3 (n.2), pp. 102.
- Lockheart, J. (2018) “The importance of writing as a material practice for art and design students: A contemporary rereading of the Coldstream Reports”, *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*, 17 (2), pp.151-175.
- Lupton, E. and Miller, J.A. (1996) *Design, Writing, Research: Writing on Graphic Design*, New York: Kiosk.
- McCannon, D. (2011), ‘Towards the hybrid essay: The “Visual Essay Project”’, *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, 4:2, pp.131–40.
- Melles, G. and Lockheart, J. (2012), ‘Writing purposefully in art and design: Responding to converging and diverging new academic literacies’, *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 11:4, pp. 346–362.
- Nyffenegger, F. (2010) Becoming friends with the ABC Reflections on writing across the design curriculum. Symposium proceedings, ELIA Biennial Conference Nantes.
- Orr, S., & Blythman, M. (2002). The Process of Design is Almost Like Writing an Essay. *The Writing Center Journal*, 22(2), 39–54.
- Orr, S., Blythman, M., & Mullin, J.A. (2006). Designing Your Writing/Writing Your Design: Art and Design Students Talk about the Process of Writing and the Process of Design. *Across the Disciplines*, 3, 1-12.
- Rintoul, J. (2017) *Integrating critical and contextual studies in art and design: possibilities for post-compulsory education*. London: Routledge.
- Taussing, M. (2011) *I Swear I Saw This: Drawing in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely my Own*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Wood, J. (1998), ‘The culture of academic rigour: Does design research really need it?’, *Design Journal*, 3:1, pp. 44–57