Introduction

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Prior to graduate school, I worked at a branding consultancy focused on work for universities and non-profits. More than I initially realized, this work has impacted my personal practice immensely. We worked on branding systems that had to convey consistent messages to a wide variety of audiences, and this mode of working has made me think about all my projects in terms of systems, no matter their size. Because we were working closely with university administrators and in-house communications teams, we often experienced the contrast between the external image these institutions hoped to maintain or improve and the contradictory behind-the-scenes inner workings. Seeing these contradictions at the micro-institutional scale has led to my interest in the same phenomena at the global scale.

My undergraduate experience was at a liberal arts school. The broad-based curriculum impacted the way I make connections between disparate ideas. In addition to design and studio art, my courses focused on foreign language and the humanities. Just as it does now, what I was reading outside of art and design fed directly into the work I was making in the studio.
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Abstract

I am interested in origins and starting points and how those get manipulated or corrupted systematically to create new forms. I want to investigate the crafting of reality. How are ideas and forms distorted to fabricate new realities or new truths that were unimaginable before but seem inevitable once they come into existence?

Given the current political and cultural context, Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* resonates more than ever. In this text, Baudrillard sketches out a world in which nothing is real and everything is a mere simulation, “the generation of models of a real without origin or a reality: a hyperreal.” How do I use the mechanics and vocabulary of design to investigate the hyperreal?

I have long been interested in politics and mass media. My work aims to subvert images, implements, gestures, and language from media and politics, creating recursive systems that distort, exaggerate, or fragment graphic form. I want to investigate mediated spaces and spaces of translation or transmission that frame the structures of reality.

Increasingly, I am becoming more interested in space and structure rather than surface, and on dynamic rather than static content. What is the potential for spaces, systems, and experiences to self-generate content or to become content themselves?
Being new to Richmond, I was eager to learn about the history and politics that shaped the city’s communities and infrastructure. Urban planner Ryan Gravel writes that “…as much as our infrastructure shapes our cultural perspectives, our perspectives also shape the infrastructure we build.”

How does political ideology impact policies that create further problems down the road? How are those problems exacerbated by further political maneuvering?

An interest in the disruption caused by the construction of the interstate highway system led me to a deeper visual investigation of the Jackson Ward community in Richmond. This neighborhood, known at one point as the “Harlem of the South,” was the center of African American culture in the region. The community was split in half by the construction of the Richmond-Petersburg turnpike (I-95) in the 1950s. A block-wide swath was cut into the cityscape, leaving scars of destruction that still remain unhealed. Hundreds of historic homes and neighborhood structures were cleared for the sake of America’s burgeoning car culture.

This publication captures my research into the Skipwith-Roper Cottage, a house built by a freed slave during the antebellum period in Jackson Ward. The house was a cornerstone in the community for almost two centuries before a demolition crew unceremoniously tore it down in the name of slum clearance, to make way for an on-ramp to I-95.

This piece used design as a way to unpack the ramifications for communities impacted by urban planning decisions that undercut history and cultural memory.
Physis and Techne and the Suburban Ideal

The push and pull between physis and techne informs my investigation into the Anthropocene Epoch, the present era in which human activity alone makes the largest impact on global ecological systems. As Martin Heidegger writes, Physis is the natural world, anything that comes into being and fades away all on its own, specifically without human interference. Techne is a broad term meaning human intervention on nature. In this work, I am looking specifically at suburban development and its inherent irony. Suburbanites want to live alongside an idealized version of nature, but they alter and destroy the environment to make that possible. Instead of accommodating the natural world, they end up trying to control and contain it. Policy driven by the car-first suburban mentality isolates and addresses smaller issues related to the environment but fails to grasp the totality of our dilemma. The result is dislocation and fragmentation, a constant and uncontrollable formation, deconstruction, and reformation of the landscape.

My investigation includes a series of posters and a web-based interactive piece. The posters are examinations of common signifiers of suburban development—single-family homes with yards and driveways, cul-de-sacs, strip malls, and parking lots. Juxtaposed with these images and icons are fragmented photos from the natural environment around suburban Richmond, Virginia. An illustration of an idealized suburban landscape degrades, mutates, and rearranges itself across the compositions.

Viewers interact with the web piece, shaping the composition by shuffling the entire graphic at once or by moving individual squares. This restarts the cycle of degradation/pixelation. The composition constantly changes, transforming itself into endless configurations. Just as soon as we grasp individual pieces of the composition—a cul-de-sac here, a piece of the river there—the image degrades and reconfigures itself. Complete resolution is always out of reach. We affect one part of the system, but we never have a grasp of the whole. It never quite fits together, and it is impossible to fully resolve.

Cycles and Loops

Starting by documenting my collection of kitschy souvenirs, I began an investigation into the ubiquity of images of landmarks and cultural cliches. My initial question was simple—how does meaning change as these images are replicated and shared over and over? This led to the creation of a series of flipbooks exploring the nature of loops, the repetition of images, and animated forms that bridge the digital and analog.

Capital

Mark Fisher argues that under the framework of “capitalist realism,” capitalism has such a firm grip on us that we cannot imagine any other kind of reality. Everything has been commodified through a system of capital equivalencies, and everything is run as a business. This flag illustrates the orchestrated obfuscation that puts layers between corporate bureaucracy and individual concerns.

Images of the Hyperreal

The flipbook studies evolved into images and video loops that become distorted or degraded over time, working in the same way as my earlier interactive piece, Physis and Techne. The souvenirs that inspired the flipbooks are symbols of places, icons used to reinforce metanarratives about national and regional identity. Through their constant reproduction and dissemination, the meaning of these cultural icons is constantly reshaped or replaced in the same way that digital images lose resolution and take on different forms when copied and shared repeatedly. Layers of reality and simulation build onto one another, in the same way that Jean Baudrillard writes about the hyperreal.

Artist and writer Hito Steyerl has influenced the trajectory of my work and has provided another nuance in my reading of Baudrillard’s Simulation and Simulacra. Steyerl writes about the potency of images that take on a life of their own as they move through digital cycles of reproduction and degradation:

Poor images are the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies’ shores. They testify to the violent dislocation, transfers, and displacement of images—their acceleration and circulation within the vicious cycles of audiovisual capitalism. Poor images are dragged around the globe as commodities or their effigies, as gifts or as bounty. They spread pleasure or death threats, conspiracy theories or bootlegs, resistance or stultification.5

The pieces in this body of work live mostly as digital artifacts. I distilled pixelated images from the videos and flipbooks into a piece made with acrylic and vinyl as a way to bring these ideas into a physical space. This piece would inform future work.

Typefaces are systems. I am intrigued by the idea that each decision in the design process affects the entire system at every step of the way. Agnes is a typeface based on classic British storefront signage. Taking cues from multiple samples in Alan Bartram’s Fascia Lettering in the British Isles, this project is an attempt to create a typeface that works at all scales while retaining quirks usually reserved for display type. The goal is not to create a nostalgic reproduction but to create contemporary forms that adapt and reinterpret these distinct nineteenth and early twentieth-century letterforms.

Moving forward and integrating type design into my practice further, how can I create recursive or generative systems that inform the creation of new typefaces?

6. This typeface is named after the House of Agnes, a Bed & Breakfast I visited in Canterbury, England. Supposedly the inn is as old as Geoffrey Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales and sits along the route the characters would have traversed on pilgrimage to the city. Also, my cat’s name is Agnes.

Cycles and Distortions

Responding to the headlines surrounding the inauguration of Donald Trump, I initiated a series of studies exploring distorted typographic form.

The flipbooks and distorted forms I was making earlier led directly to these studies. I began to see the relationship between the pages of printed matter and the individual frames in an animation. Instead of creating a moving image, these pieces stretch, skew, and fragment type, concealing and revealing legibility based on interaction and point of view. Accordion books afforded the opportunity to explore dualities and opposing ideas through the splicing of content.
I have always been interested in hacking processes—in this case, it was figuring out how to feed large sheets of paper into a risograph duplicator. The form of the object reveals the physicality, cumbersomeness, and limitations of the process. Artifacts from the process of making printed matter become discrete objects in their own right.

Addressing the artifacts of process, artist Sol Lewitt wrote:

> All intervening steps—scribbles, sketches, drawings, failed works, models, studies, thoughts, conversations—are of interest. Those that show the thought process of the artist are sometimes more interesting than the final product.8

I am interested in the forms that emerge by surprise when I am en route to another idea. I like creating constrained systems, putting them into production, then letting the process dictate the next move.

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The introduction of imagery and the choice of color echo ephemera from political rallies or propaganda posters. The pieces take on different meaning depending on their display. In banner form they draw attention to the surface; when crumpled on the table they become sculptural.

The content is esoteric, and the forms speak in different ways. Something is happening versus something took place. An active communication versus a cast-off artifact.
Spectacle, Part I

The earlier studies through printed matter informed installations that move into larger-scale experiments using multiple forms of media. Spectacle, Part I is about contradiction, exaggeration, and hyperbole—an exposed wrinkle of the hyperreality of politics and media.

The teleprompter is an illusion, an optical trick we play along with so that we might believe that people of authority address us directly through eye contact without skipping a rhetorical beat. Here the teleprompter is flipped around—instead of an accessory to the podium, it replaces it.

We see the surface of the reflective glass and through it simultaneously. The glass is the mediator between the viewer and the scrolling text emitted below in mirror image. The text implicates the audience as both passive viewer and active reader. Two stretched out, warped banners frame the simulated telepromptor, suggesting the scene of an absurd political rally.

At once we stand at the point of view of authority and audience. At once we read from power and vulnerability. At once, we contemplate mirage and reality.
Spectacle, Part II

Building on prior work, this installation is an exploration of politics and media, more specifically the role of public opinion. At a fundamental level, Spectacle, Part II is an investigation of control. In politics we often hear about the extent to which public opinion polls affect the behavior of candidates and elected officials. Politicians and media executives act in ways that preempt the latest Gallup polls, Nielsen ratings, Google analytics, and social media mentions. The result is an infinite, self-perpetuating, distorted loop that consolidates power and reinforces hegemony. This work is an attempt to unfurl the simultaneous power and illusion of public opinion to shape policy.

A pedestal with a joystick and button confronts viewers with an awkward invitation to interact with the piece. Moving the joystick and clicking the button causes the wave on the television screen to fluctuate in response, an allusion to the charts documenting public opinion polls. Viewers control the black wave, covering or revealing the live broadcast underneath, but little else changes as a result.

I am continuing to explore two-dimensional forms, such as banners, as sculptural elements or as ways to create immersive environments. In this piece, the main banner is even more exaggerated than in Spectacle, Part I. Viewers enter into it physically to interact with the screen and take command of the pedestal, which then acts as the missing lectern from Part I. This puts viewers in a place of control, which is simultaneously real and imagined.
Precedents

Metahaven
Work centered in the realm of geopolitics, technology, and philosophy/aesthetics

The Rodina
Performance-centered work; physical embodiment and politics, technology, social movements

Hito Steyerl
“Militarization, the role of the media in globalization, and the mass proliferation and dissemination of images and knowledge brought on by digital technologies”

Dunne and Raby
Foundational discourse on speculative and critical design

Mevis & Van Deursen
Typographic systems, generative design

Morehshin Allahyari
“Additivism,” artwork and research that addresses digital colonialism

Sol Lewitt
Conceptual art, the idea as a work of art

Cory Arcangel
Post-conceptual and technology-based artwork, hacked and manipulated software and video games

Radim Peško
Contemporary/experimental typeface design

Hasan Elahi
Artwork and research focused on social implications of technology and media

See the interactive piece at drewsisk.com/power
Moving Forward

In my latest work, I am using design as a way to take large frameworks and complicated, contradictory systems and simplify them into abstract forms and fragmented situations. I want to continue exploring graphic design as immersive experience. At the same time, I am attempting to set the stage for the presentation of content and interactions that I cannot predict.

Spectacle, Part II was a continuation of my interest in creating systems and relinquishing control. Although this piece is an orchestrated situation, I have no idea what will be broadcast on the screen at any given moment or how and to what extent viewers will respond. I am fascinated by emergent systems and dynamic, responsive forms.

I want to continue investigating how important direct viewer interaction is to my work. So far, the recent interactive pieces I have made—more specifically Physis and Techne and Spectacle, Part II—have been proto-interactive. Conceptually they are meant to purposefully frustrate the viewer, but they leave the viewer with limited agency. I need to reconcile the line between meaningful interaction and passive confusion.

Designer and writer Michael Rock argues that graphic form is content in and of itself, "a kind of text ... as complex and referential as any traditional understanding of content." How can I expose the mechanisms and gestures of design as a way to question the structures of politics and media consumption in the age of the hyperreal?

Ongoing Questions

How do I give visual form to contradictions?

What does it mean to create a recursive or self-perpetuating system through both analog and digital processes?

How do generative processes or systems create discrete objects that stand on their own as aestheticized artifacts of production?

How are narratives created that distort and perpetuate origin myths?

How does performance build a simulation of reality?

What is the boundary between simulation and illusion?

How does traditionally two-dimensional media transform into sculpture?

How do I set the conditions for creating forms, relinquish control, and then reclaim or reframe the outputs?

What are the effects of repetition and forms that degrade gradually through a progression of loops?

How do I create a reality that then creates its own simulation, a recursive system in a vacuum?

What is the difference between individual and collective reality?

How important is interactivity in my work?

What are the effects of hyperreality, assuming prior realities are consumed, destroyed, and forgotten?

How can I hack production processes and manipulate the affordances of different materials and forms?

Bibliography


