

## **Dog biscuits won't save the world**

### **Biography:**

**Justy Phillips** is currently Head of Graphic Design at the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania. Phillips moved to Tasmania from England in 2003, where she co-founded the design partnership girlsinflight and spent several years teaching graphic design in institutions such as the London College of Communication, University of Brighton and Kent Institute of Art & Design. A graduate of the Royal College of Art, Justy continues to explore ideas through expecting good weather, a multi-disciplinary arts practice she established in 2004.

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### Research Interests

A passion for the printed word has led Phillips into explorations in graphic authorship, self-publishing, typography in public spaces and design responsibility. In a twice yearly publication called spacer, Phillips has investigated many subjects including 'designs for life', memory, loss, the suicide of graphic design and 'twenty-six one day projects to help you change the world'. Current research interests include the development of 'Typotastic' – Australia's first publication dedicated to the critical writings on typography, and also, billboard advertising, exploring notions of 'hope' and the relationship between the built environment and sound. Phillips works across a range of media including video, sound, print and three-dimensional installation.

As design educators, the first question we should be asking ourselves, and our respective institutions, is this – what exactly are we educating our graphic designers for? In what are we asking them to believe, to promote, to document, or sell? The answers to these questions begin to dictate how we, as designers, develop our own personal design philosophies and ultimately, inform every decision we make in professional practice.

In a recent article titled 'I come to bury this World', Terry Irwin suggests what might be required to further this development,

“A significant perceptual shift is required of us – a shift in our perception of ourselves; a shift in our perception of design; and most importantly, a shift in the way we view the world. Such a shift could lead to new design solutions, and it is necessary to transition this profession and design education to the next level”.<sup>1</sup>

I will discuss the significant potential of embracing design responsibility within design education, in respect of the needs and expectations of students, educators, and community clients, citing selected examples of progressive and innovative educational practice, which actively promote and engage this model.

The notion of design responsibility is bounded by a number of questions – framed here in an online review of American design writer, Steven Heller's 2004 book, *Citizen Designer*,

'What does it mean to be a designer in this corporate-driven, over-branded, global consumer culture? Who are designers responsible to? Who do these designers work for? Are they

researching clients, making sure these are not fraudulent, polluting or abusing? Do they still work for them? Do they take a stand? Or figure bills need to be paid? What is responsible design?<sup>2</sup>

Our first responsibility is in our desire to find answers to these questions.

Graphic design can engage with social, economic and political issues, creating both beautifully idealistic and pragmatically realistic outcomes. In 1964, Ken Garland, launched the First Things First manifesto, which called for designers to focus their attention on projects of greater social and community value and for their skills to be put to 'worthwhile'<sup>3</sup> use. The manifesto was revisited and re-launched with some urgency in 2000, with thirty-three signatories proposing 'a reversal of priorities (away from advertising, marketing and brand development) in favour of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of communication'<sup>4</sup>. Educating students in the field of graphic design, involves areas of specialisation and diversity, and whilst we should not forget nor dismiss the fact that our profession is capable of selling dog biscuits and fizzy drinks, shouldn't we really be embracing its ability to support and enhance the voices of individuals and communities to effect change? That graphic design can empower people to change their lives, beyond simply eating more dog biscuits and fizzy drinks is a virtue we should be celebrating.

If we believe that graphic design can change the world, which I do, let's not forget, that all graphic design is not good graphic design. We can all recall that it was a poorly designed Florida ballot paper, which led to the election of George W. Bush in the 2000 United States Federal election. And with that result, surely the world has changed. It is also interesting to note, that it was the professional body for graphic design in America, the American Institute of Graphic Arts which helped, in 2002, to establish 'Design for Democracy' – an Illinois-based non-profit initiative established to implement improvements to voting materials and processes across the United States.

At the Tasmanian School of Art, each student joins the graphic design studio with a personal set of social, economic and political values.



Figure 1 Year 1 identity project – make a gift (Sally Cuthbert)

These values are a reflection of an individuals' relationship to the world through a recognition of their own identity, connection to their home, family and life experience. Throughout their study, students are encouraged to develop these values alongside an understanding of the fundamental principles of graphic design, to create a workable, liveable and practical

philosophy, through which they can continue to develop their work. The practice of graphic design is not something, which should exist outside these values, but rather, it should be experienced through and informed by them. As Kenneth Fitzgerald commented in *Émigré* No.66, 'An education *through* design rather than *in* design should be our goal'.<sup>5</sup>

We explore these ideas throughout our undergraduate and postgraduate units in graphic design, in order for each student to work towards developing their own set of core design values. This deep approach to learning is reflected in the words of American design educator Katherine McCoy, who said,

'We must stop inadvertently training our students to ignore their convictions and be passive economic servants. Instead, we must help them to clarify their personal values and to give them the tools to recognise when it is appropriate to act on them...we still need objectivity, but this includes the objectivity to invoke personal biases and when to set them aside'.<sup>6</sup>

This approach to student 'training' led McCoy into transforming the graphic design Graduate Program at Cranbrook Academy of Art, into a force, which changed the face of American graphic design in the 1990's, through the passionately outspoken and talented body of designers and writers it produced.

To engage students in this way is no easy task. British design critic, Rick Poynor, describes his experience of such attempts, whilst observing a tutorial on sustainable design tutorial at the School of Communication Design at London's Royal College of Art. In this description, he describes how,

'...(the tutor) gave a spellbinding performance, unleashing a scintillating stream of facts, statistics and examples of earlier environmentally based art and communication projects. He outlined the issues and constructed a cogent and provocative set of arguments. The students—about forty of them, all studying at masters level, young adults in their mid-twenties—sat there like a bunch of sullen, unresponsive kids, offering only a few occasional, usually sarcastic remarks. Here was someone who was very definitely against things, but this display of a fiercely engaged, critical intelligence seemed to make this group uneasy. It's not even that they argued against his point of view. Why should they? What a waste of energy, and for that matter, how uncool! The time for being against things is over.'<sup>7</sup>

As one of the 'kids' fortunate enough to be in that room, I can only agree with Poynor's recollection of that tutorial. It's not only a question of why we engage students in design responsibility, but more over, a question of how.

As we develop our courses of study, we need to explore the different ways in which we can help students towards clarifying their personal values. To do this effectively, we should offer a range of approaches, enabling each student to accommodate their beliefs into their own systems of learning. As a graphic design studio, our belief in the virtues of design responsibility underpins our critical framework, which is structured around a set of core fundamental principles. These are delivered to students through a wide range or learning

activities. These include short workshops, conceptual and skills-based projects, collaborative, peer interventions and live, community design projects.

Our critical framework and resulting ideology, is reflected succinctly by Eric Heiman, Assistant professor of Design at the California College for the Arts. In his essay 'Three wishes: A graphic design spew cycle in the new (and scary) George W. era' he states that:

'Design is not solely a service industry but a cultural and political force as well'.<sup>8</sup>

We need to look at ways of communicating with each of our students through their own aspirations and intentions, not only through their own belief systems, but also through the professional standards and documented intentions of our industry. Two examples of initiatives through which we have found success in aligning such principles are the, *what does this place mean to you?*, and the, *I am here...* workshops. In the former, students are asked to answer a simple question, which relates to their choice to study at the Tasmanian School of Art.

What does this place mean to you? may refer to their individual working space, to the School design studio, to the city of Hobart, or to their State or Country. Responses such as '*home*' and '*a place to learn and have fun*', revealed a sense of ownership, optimism and commitment to these sites.

Having established such direct links to place, students were then asked to complete the following sentence – *I am here to...*



Figure 2 I am here workshop

Revealing, in most cases, an equally strong and surprising link to passion and purpose.



Figure 3 I am here workshop

In developing constructive discussion platforms, we allow our students to engage with real problems and propose real solutions to issues, which affect the lives of other people. In their second year of study, we run a Social Design project, within which, we ask students to work collaboratively in developing their own Design Manifestos.

With increased confidence and self-assurance, students are able to develop their more clearly defined personal and professional aspirations into manageable statements of intent. The aim of this workshop is not to construct an inflexible dogma, but a theory of possibility, framed by innovation, risk-taking and impossibility.



Figure 4 Manifesto workshop

The statements, which draw these manifestos together harbour intelligent, passionate designers, who, without exception, want to be engaged in challenging, content driven work.



Figure 5 Manifesto workshop



Figure 6 Manifesto workshop

Above all, these students want to believe in what they're doing and hold a good understanding of why they are doing it. This is the kind of learning we are interested in.

This engagement with community issues encourages each of us – students and educators alike to forward such conversations on the future of our profession beyond the glass walls and relative safety of our institutions. In one major, project-based initiative we are attempting to take our ideas beyond the classroom and into the community. The Community Design project is a compulsory and collaborative team-based initiative, open to final year undergraduate students. This project offers each student the opportunity to work with a not-for-profit, community organisation within Tasmania. The project offers these 'clients' the opportunity to realise their respective projects through accessible and affordable design solutions created by our student teams.

The project is run over a five-week period, which encompasses client meetings, research and conceptual development, design solutions and final presentations to the client.

In the initial planning stages of the project, we work closely with TasCOSS, the peak body for the Tasmanian community services sector, under the umbrella of their Sustainable Organisations Project. Our project is publicised through the TasCOSS newsletter and website, resulting this year, in nine organisations requesting to be included. These groups were then asked to complete a project briefing document, which asked for information regarding the key objectives of their organisation, the nature of the project for which they were requesting design assistance, expected outcomes and any existing resources or funding monies to which they had access. The answers to these questions allowed us to gain a greater understanding of client expectations, and whether or not they were achievable by the teams we had in place.

The studio selected five organisations for inclusion in the project. The activities of these groups covered a wide range of social, economic and cultural agendas, such as Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual support, Youth networking, music making and distribution and sustainable aquaculture. Each of these five groups was then assigned to a small team of graphic design students.



Figure 7 Community Design project meeting 1

One organisation, which joined the project in 2005, was Working It Out Inc. (WIO).



Figure 8 Working It Out meeting two

This group is Tasmania's only organization specifically funded to provide services for lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) members of the community. WIO requested a high quality website offering information, contact details, with links to other related sites, which could also be used to market their education and professional development work within the wider community. So, what do our community clients expect from participating in this project? From the outset, WIO were hopeful that any outcomes should offer; improved access to support and information for LGBT Tasmanians, and an increase in public understanding and awareness of LGBT issues. They had already secured some funding towards their new site, but lacked the funding or skills to implement any research, development or production needed to launch their site online.

The design team embraced the challenge of this complex project, and perhaps surprisingly, with their relative inexperience, it was they, not their clients, who steered the design process from start to finish.



Figure 9 Working It Out meeting four

In their written rationale, presented upon completion of the project, the student team showed an understanding of both the conceptual and practical considerations of the site. The project forced each student to consider issues of diversity, specificity, user interface and experience, consistency of style and identity, system navigation and distribution of information.



Figure 10 WIO design solution

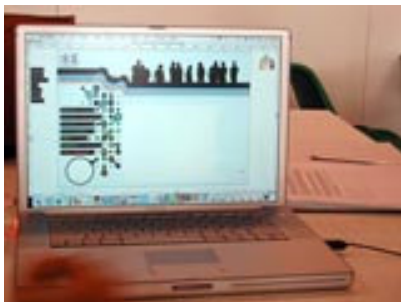


Figure 11 WIO design solution

Meetings held within the design team itself, and those between the design team and their clients were highly respectful and professional in nature. The significance of the project and the high expectations of its success empowered the students to work collaboratively, each working best to the skills and approaches which underpinned their respective design philosophies. Of course, there were moments of frustration, disagreement and discontent throughout each phase of the project within the groups themselves, but these were discussed and celebrated as an important aspect of the collaborative process. Design educator, Anne Bush, makes the comment in her essay, *Beyond Pro bono, Graphic Design's Social Work*, that 'Fostering the ability to analyse and question encourages debate and action'<sup>9</sup>. She comments further on the notion of design responsibility,

'In the most fundamental sense, then, responsibility is the ability to respond. It is not just the willingness to act, but also the ability to understand one's actions, the context in which they are applied, and the widest range of implications for their reception and potential reinterpretation...what design education can contribute to participatory society is the engaged and aware citizen who understands the ramifications of action and inaction, yet (ultimately) is given the option to choose.'<sup>10</sup>

This project relates to our critical framework in a number of ways. It allows each student to exercise their core design values through an engagement with real clients and real-life issues.





Figure 12 Tasmusic



Figure 13 Tasmen website (Earl Martin)

The project, through its collaborative nature, forces a compromise of these values, allowing several distinctive philosophies to come together, overlap and create something entirely new. This process demonstrates to students and clients, that impossible visions can often turn into possible realities. The project offers each student the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of issues surrounding diversity, complexity and audience. Our feedback suggests that with increased knowledge, students feel far better equipped to address these big issues in the future.

During this project, students are acting as both service providers, and as a force for social and cultural change. The notion of service provision is often derided as 'selling out' by students, and is thought to incur a life, punctuated by the banal and repetitious demands of marketing moguls and inexperienced clients. As design educators, maybe we should be more aware of the type of service provision we are encouraging our students to provide. We need to promote a culture of learning, which encourages students to accept that the outcomes of design have consequence. It is this realisation that will ultimately dictate the level of care and ownership we are prepared to offer the work WE ultimately create.

I believe, that it is through embracing the diversity and difference of our community, that we gain a greater understanding of the lives of other people, and in turn, gain a greater understanding ourselves of the what makes us who we are and who we hope to become. It is my belief, that engaging our students to formulate design philosophies by reflecting upon the world, in which they live, fosters a deep approach to learning that can easily be translated into practice.

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- <sup>1</sup> Irwin, Terry, *I come to Bury This World*, Émigré No.66/ Nudging graphic design, Princeton Architectural Press, Berkeley, 2004, p89
- <sup>2</sup> Book review, Citizen Designer: Perspectives on Design Responsibility  
<http://www.underconsideration.com/speakup/archives/002160.html>, (10.08.05)
- <sup>3</sup> *First Things First Manifesto 2000, Thirty-three visual communicators renew the 1964 call for a change of priorities*, Eye Feature, issue 33, [www.eyemagazine.co.uk](http://www.eyemagazine.co.uk), (14.08.05)
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Fitzgerald, Kenneth, *I come to bury this world*, Émigré No.66/ Nudging graphic design, Princeton Architectural Press, Berkeley, 2004, p37
- <sup>6</sup> McCoy, Katherine, *Good Citizenship, Design as a Social and Political Force*; Citizen Designer, (ed.) Heller and Vienne, Allworth press, 2003
- <sup>7</sup> Poynor, Rick, *The Time For Being Against*,  
<http://www.typotheque.com/site/article.php?id=33>, a talk given at the *Looking Closer*, AIGA conference, New York, 2001
- <sup>8</sup> Heiman, Eric, *Three wishes: Agraphic design spew cycle in the new (and scary) George W. era*, Émigré No.66, Nudging Graphic Design, Princeton Architectural Press, Berkeley, 2004, p80
- <sup>9</sup> Bush, Anne, *Beyond pro Bono, graphic Design's Social Work: Citizen Designer*, p29, (ed.) Heller and Vienne, Allworth press, 2003
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.

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