

Making Public the Making Public

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Biography

Adam Cruickshank is an artist and designer based in Melbourne, Australia. He worked for 20 years as a designer and art director in the world of commercial publishing before restarting a dormant art practice in 2008. He has exhibited widely since that time, is currently a PhD candidate at RMIT University and teaches in the MADA Faculty at Monash University.

Abstract

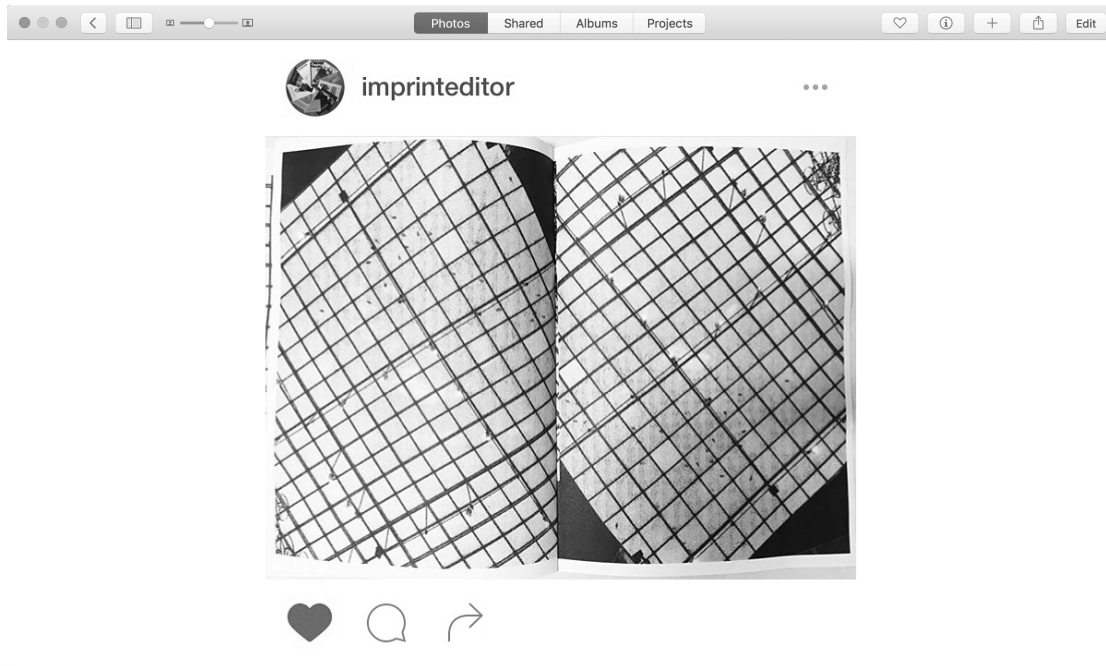
Graphic design for exhibitions is most commonly considered a kind of support practice: it gives form to the thoughts of curators, to the 'brand' of the gallery, to the exhibition itself and to the artist(s) involved. It also increasingly mediates the space between audiences and exhibited artworks – often through curatorial intervention and collaboration – resulting in a heightened contribution to the understandings that exhibitions are able to generate in audiences. Unlike catalogues, invitations and other designed ephemera, the actual exhibitions almost always last a predetermined length of time, with 3 months being a common maximum. The associated objects of graphic design come to represent exhibitions into the future in ways that are often removed from the experience of the exhibition itself.

While we might reasonably consider exhibitions to be slotted permanently into the archive, in reality it is the interpretive and parallel objects of graphic design that do this task. This paper proposes a methodology of practice that takes account of the increasingly intertwined relationships between exhibitions, artworks and 'supporting' graphic design and suggests methods for adapting these relationships to new models. These concerns are exemplified particularly by a project of my own (that constitutes part of my current PhD research) which is discussed at length: *Making Public the Making Public*, performed recently at the NGV Art Book Fair, 2016.

In conclusion the paper argues for the emergence of a particular cross-discipline: one that takes account of its conditions of production and display by utilising those conditions as both its material limits and the object of its inquiry.

Keywords: Collaboration, institutional critique, support structures

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Screenshot of 'imprinteditor' Instagram feed.

*Photos of seagulls on the roof of the NGV while Tony Ellwood delivers the opening speech at the NGV Art Book Fair 2016. (First printed Melbourne 7:30pm, Friday 29th April, 2016).
Photo of booklet by Emily Kiddell, 2016.*

Introduction

Graphic design for exhibitions is most commonly considered a kind of support practice: it makes-public, legitimizes and archives the arguments of curators, essayists and artists. It does so also for the brand of the gallery and documentation of the exhibition itself. Celine Conderelli sought to make relationships such as these more apparent with the publication of her book *Support Structures* (though it is not expressly focused on graphic design), which she describes as a 'manual... for those things that encourage, give comfort, approval, and solace....' (Conderelli, 2009 6). Taken in itself, this view suggests these 'supports' work peripherally, consigning them to their secondary position behind the primacy of artistic production. This paper acknowledges graphic design as a significant, direct contributor and collaborator to contemporary exhibition making (whether intentional or otherwise) and explores the potential for new relationships between graphic design and exhibition practices. Primarily these concerns are discussed in relation to a project of mine: *Making Public the Making Public* performed at the National Gallery of Victoria's 2016 Art Book Fair. More generally my research seeks to advocate for a particular cross-disciplinary practice: one that takes account of the conditions of its production and display by utilising those

conditions as both its material field and the object of its inquiry.

Ever since Daniel Buren acknowledged in his catalogue text for Documenta V in 1972 that ‘more and more, the subject of an exhibition tends not to be the display of artworks, but the exhibition of the exhibition as a work of art’, (Buren, 2003 1) exhibition ‘supports’ or ‘frameworks’ are not only increasingly complicit in shaping and providing content, but are recognised as such.¹ Frameworks are deployed both by artists seeking contextual engagement with exhibition sites and also by the sites themselves, for varying reasons. Architecture, installation design, curatorial intervention, marketing and graphic design now contribute to understandings generated by exhibitions in ways and measures that Buren might have found difficult to believe in 1972. Although it seems fair to state that often the reason arts institutions conflate artworks with overt branding, coloured walls, press releases, catalogues, websites, etc. is not because they acknowledge that the apparent autonomy offered by unfettered white space is an illusion, but rather because this ‘ambience of distraction’ is a direct result of ‘the museum’ becoming ‘a vast educational institution-cum-emporium, one of whose functions is the exhibition of art. The primary function is entertainment and education in various mixes, and the marketing of experiences, tastes, and simulacra.’ (Sontag, 2003 102).

Perhaps these disparate mechanisms (including such obvious things as catalogues but also opening hours, wayfinding signage, the paths taken by invigilators, the typefaces used in websites, informative wall panels, community education events, etc.), could be said to combine in indeterminate, essentially ungoverned ways that might – in effect and intent – be ‘helpful’, but that might also congeal as unpredictable or even seem to work at cross purposes. This needn’t be viewed as a problem, rather it simply reflects the vast range of procedures, personalities and objects that work in varying degrees of cooperation and autonomy that collaboratively come together in the form of exhibitions. These effects, taken as a whole and including the artwork itself are the field from within which audiences understand exhibitions. Discussing the work of Louise Lawler, Andrea Fraser has written: “It isn’t simply artists who produce aesthetic signification and value, but an often anonymous contingent of collectors, viewers, museum and gallery workers – and ultimately the cultural apparatus in which these positions are delineated.” (Fraser, 1985 292). While it remains a common perception of the work of galleries, there seems little possibility for a neutral space that autonomous artworks can inhabit – if that was ever desirable. Instead, might artists and designers adapt existing relationships to reflect both the current contributions made by ‘supports’ and to find new ways – informed by the histories of site-specificity and institutional critique – of working collaboratively?

Though there are many instances of artworks that encompass and make these mechanisms explicit (primarily from the history of artistic site-specificity, Institutional Critique and so-called 'Designart' [Coles, 2007]), most often they deal with design other than graphic. The architecture of arts institutions (Daniel Buren²), designed hierarchical relationships of power in the art world (much of Andrea Fraser's work), how art might interact with industrial or furniture design (such as work by Jorge Pardo and Liam Gillick³) or attempting to avoid the gallery system altogether (Robert Smithson and Marcel Broodthaers⁴) are among the best known tactics.

Graphic design in the context of exhibition-making is usually constrained by two methods. The first is an overt curatorial or institutional desire to 'brand' the exhibition in a manner that 'sums it up'; that condenses the usually disparate and networked nature of contemporary artworks to a graphic form (or series of forms) that attempt to act as exhibition proxy, primarily for purposes of promotion. The second is that the gallery might act as a holding vessel for graphic design from outside the gallery context that has been recontextualised within it⁵. While the latter can be illuminating, (as almost any human endeavour from 'outside' exhibition practices can be if thoughtfully 'exhibited'), it perhaps misses an existent opportunity. The already ubiquitous presence of graphic design in exhibition-making might be better employed in the revelation of itself in relation to the way it mediates exhibitions, rather than as a legitimizing voice in the first instance or as a representation (but not re-enactment) of its original intent in the second. Instead of the lack of contextual specificity that *design for exhibition* tends to have, a practice that exists concurrently as exhibition *and* its frameworks, might more readily make plain the conditions of its production and display and therefore acknowledge the vast range of imbricated disciplines that contribute to exhibition-making.

Project

The inaugural National Gallery of Victoria Art Book Fair took place in 2015 and a number of publications I'd made were for sale (or for free) on two different stalls. Dissatisfied with the absence of publishing as activity and the predominance of book-selling, I decided in 2016 that I might approach the fair as an exhibition rather than as a shop. In what ways other than as commodity or marketing might publication design operate at the fair? My proposal was submitted through the NGV's standard stall application process, but specified that nothing would be for sale and none of my previously published works would be available. The project was to be regulated by a small set of rules: the publications must be produced on-site, they must respond to the site and they must be available to the audience – for free – immediately as they are made. Directed by practicability and financial expediency, I set up

my stall with a laptop, basic mono laser printer, rotary trimmer, long-arm stapler, camera, sound recording device and various paper stocks.

In a minor contradiction of function, the actual production of publications in order to make their form and content public remains a largely private activity. The very public event of the Art Book Fair (2016 saw 15,000 visitors over a weekend) – an exhibition in a broad sense – consists primarily of a series of publishers' stalls selling books and periodicals that were produced off-site in manners not exactly private ('traditional' publishing almost always being collaborative on some level) but certainly not open to a wider public to view or participate in. In contrast, *Making Public the Making Public* made these methods visible and available and countered a central tenet of design in general: that it is process of planning and deliberation, a propulsion to solve problems, to arrive at outcomes that are a synthesis of the designer's 'vision' and the client's requirements. This project aimed to work quickly and intuitively, to be driven by the limitations of the minimal equipment employed, to be attentive to the activity and objects that comprise the site and to make the results equally accessible to the public. In effect, to exist as an art project without the expected art exhibition frameworks (it was a book fair) but it employ the frameworks that were evident in the site (books, graphic design, marketing, etc.) as the project's content. Over the two days of the book fair I produced a series of 12 publications. Each was the same size (A5), stapled on the spine and were either 12 or 16 pages in length. A variety of paper stocks were employed, including overprinting on the NGVs Art Book Fair related 'ephemera' and other A4 materials found on site.

The book fair's opening night celebration took place from 5pm on Friday 29th April, preceded by a full-day symposium of international speakers. I spent the day both attending the symposium (photographing and sound-recording) and setting up my stall, which involved no small amount of wrestling with printers, Wi-Fi connections, cables and paper. This somewhat fraught process had left me feeling disconnected from the project: it became clear that there was real potential that the lack of predetermination might be the project's undoing. What was I going to do first? Could I respond immediately in ways that were accessible and critical? Bonnie Honig might describe the event of the book fair as a democratic 'public thing' (Honig, 2013); it is available for all to visit in a free-entry museum. Nevertheless, the opening night was a largely private event and the public nature of the fair was somewhat contradicted by its inherently commercial nature.

At approximately 5:30, Tony Ellwood, director of the NGV, began his opening-night speech. It struck me that this event might be the first booklet: the director of the NGV making-public

the aims of the fair during the invitation-only, 'special VIP drinks event' (NGV, 2016) that took place between 5pm and 6pm. I began simply by taking photos of Ellwood with my phone as he spoke. Despite being impressed by Ellwood's public speaking ability, my mind started to wander. At this stage I looked up to the glass ceiling of the NGV foyer four storeys above and noticed seagulls were landing en masse above our heads, a soundless but beautiful counterpoint to Ellwood's speech. This became the subject for the second booklet. Design for these two booklets was complete an hour later, as the second cohort of guests started to fill the space for the non-VIP section of the opening night (6pm–9pm). From the initially hesitant beginnings, these two booklets established a pattern for the rest of the fair and helped me realise the speed with which the project must respond and the vast range of procedures, disciplines, objects and events that comprise such an event. Content was suddenly everywhere. This is not to say that in their own rights they were all 'successful' publications, they were not. Or rather, the specific qualities of individual booklets are beside the point. The point was that the project was an action, a series of publications produced and dispersed over a specific two-day period, an endeavour that was most intelligible when experienced in its specific cultural context. In a sense the project ran adjacent to the fair – certainly it was subsumed by the fair and therefore by the NGV – but nevertheless separated by its manner of operation, its politely interfering nature and its lack of commercial imperatives.

Booklets produced included the aforementioned *Photos of Tony Ellwood giving the opening speech at the NGV Art Book Fair 2016. (First printed Melbourne 6:30pm, Friday 29th April, 2016)* and the related *Photos of seagulls on the roof of the NGV while Tony Ellwood delivers the opening speech at the NGV Art Book Fair 2016. (First printed Melbourne 7:30pm, Friday 29th April, 2016)*. This latter booklet ended up by far the most popular, with an estimated 80–100 made and given away during the two days. Other titles included *Photos taken at the NGV Art Book Fair 2016 Opening Preview, 6:00pm–10:00pm, Friday 29th April by Nat Thomas. (First printed Melbourne, 9:30am Saturday 30th April, 2016)*. Thomas is well known for her frank art-world (usually opening-night) photos, which she publishes on her blog and for Canberra Contemporary Art Space. I proposed that we might publish her photographs of opening night (almost) immediately and make them available to the general audience, some of whom were of course featured.

Other booklets, such as *Different typefaces employed by the NGV. (First printed Melbourne 12:45pm Sunday 1st May 2016)*, widened the site of concern from the book fair to the enabling institution. This booklet documented instances of different typefaces that included, but also fell outside of, the current official 'brand' of the NGV. Some are historical reminders

of previous identities for the NGV (such as the car park sign), and it seemed apparent others were simply made for display without reference to the current way in which the organisation wishes to make itself public (the brand guidelines), helping to reveal the jumble of relationships and personalities and methods of make-do that take place in institutions.

Jonathan Dronsfield has stated: ‘...part of what practice is is as much its institutionalization and the establishment of a space for the aesthetic experience of artworks as it is a practice of making art objects.’ (Dronsfield 2006 5). Recognition of this fact is evident in the practice of Joëlle Tuerlinckx, whose work might be approached as *exhibition as art* rather than *art as (or for) exhibition*. Tuerlinckx’s exhibition *LIKE A Book* and the publication *THIS BOOK, like a book*, are a relevant reference (Tuerlinckx, 1999). In this project, Tuerlinckx doesn’t draw the conventional distinctions between exhibition-making and its publications; the book does not represent the exhibition, it enacts it in book-form. While both deal with the same content, they are of course constrained by their particular framework, be it gallery or book. The discursive site-specificity of Tuerlinckx’s work views the sites of exhibition and publication as inextricably interwoven: the book does not act as exhibition proxy, the site of the project is embedded in both outcomes. *Making Public the Making Public* attempted to perform a site-specificity that conflated the performance and processes of the project with its produced objects, both of which are not entirely intelligible without the other. Though securely located in the site and part of it, the project also fragmented and dispersed, across Melbourne and presumably further afield. By the end of the book fair (5pm, Sunday 1st May), I had made and given away approximately 230 A5 booklets.

Outro

Despite the collective contribution made by the disparate procedures and objects that govern exhibition-making, it is graphic design which is often the most visible – it decides, after all, how the exhibition is projected into the world beyond the physical limits of the exhibition space and also into the future, bearing in mind that exhibitions often last three weeks, and the book fair itself only two days. The 2016 NGV Art Book Fair will be remembered in part by its own archive of ephemera: a program of events (a folded A3 marketing document), general photographic documentation of the fair in progress, copies of books launched at the fair and copies of the booklets I produced. A failing of my project might be that a book fair does not work in the same ways as an exhibition of artworks and their general stated intents are quite different. Such an intervention might be more appropriate, more productive if, for example, the action was performed in order to generate an exhibition ‘catalogue’; a document that responds to (instead of represents) artworks in an exhibition and that is produced simultaneously with that exhibition.

While we might reasonably consider exhibitions to be slotted permanently into the archive, in reality it is the interpretive objects of graphic design that do this task. The realisation that so-called ephemera is in most cases more permanent than the exhibition itself leads to recognition of an historicising effect of the archive: in the years and decades after an exhibition has taken place the objects of graphic design continue to further characterise and colour experiences of exhibitions. It should be noted that the most common encounter with 'the exhibition' most people will have is with its documentation; catalogues, press, websites, archives, and other objects of graphic design. The ways that 'ephemera' relate to both the experience of an historical exhibition and to the prevailing attitudes and trends of the day, (be they critical, economic, social, etc.), are unpredictable at best. In discussing the shift in institutional critique and site specific practices from one of literal physical sites to a more discursive model, Miwon Kwon states: 'Institutional framing of art, in other words, not only distinguishes qualitative value; it also (re)produces specific forms of knowledge that are historically located and culturally determined – not at all universal or timeless standards.' (Kwon 2004 19).

Buren, in discussing his work for Documenta V in *Reboundings*, states: 'Finally, should there be any contradiction between this text and the work from which it originates, it is preferable to a haughty silence, or a tasteful endistancement, of which the sole beneficiary is the system.' (Buren, 1977 6). *Reboundings* was published five years after the exhibition it refers to, a distance Buren considers enough to have allowed the work to speak on its own terms and not to become "more enmeshed in the very system which it opposes..." (Buren, 1977 5). Of course access to the work now (*Exposition d'une Exposition* at Documenta V in 1972) is primarily via *Reboundings* that despite Buren's careful arguments otherwise, is necessarily – and increasingly – the most common encounter with the work and therefore comes to both embody and re-enact it.

The booklets made for *Making Public the Making Public* at the 2016 NGV Art Book Fair may very well take on this task, just as the scant printed materials made by the NGV will do. My action was a relatively minor part of the fair; it was not specifically promoted by the NGV and took place on only one of sixty stalls. Yet there remains the possibility that this project comes to represent the fair into the future in ways disproportionate to its contribution. Perhaps there is a possibility that projects such as this might be integrated more fully into the proceedings – into the actual structure of how such fairs or exhibitions operate – that would produce objects of graphic design that rather than represent exhibitions (at arm's length), (re)enact them both during production and into the future.

The manner of responding to exhibition-as-site in the performative production of publications that is outlined here recognises the apparent contradiction between experience of such events and their traditional forms of documentation. The book fair itself is driven by a range of people, institutions, objects and procedures that remain unpredictable at best and that therefore successfully evade attempts at representation via catalogues or other traditional documentation. Rather this project operated expediently and contingently, the booklets produced reflected the essentially unmediated, disparate, discursive nature of contemporary exhibition-making. This project did not attempt a comprehensive 'summing-up' of the book fair, it recognises full explication of the experience of the fair is unfeasible. But it did attempt a dialogue with the institution; a performative, contingent response to the site, it sought a particular use-value that comes from its non-commercial nature and its engagement with content on a personal – albeit collective – level.

Footnotes

1. This quote is from a 2003 essay located at e-flux, *Where are all the artists gone?* by Daniel Buren. The original text, which was printed in the catalogue for Documenta V (1972) is also reprinted in *Reboundings* from 1977, the translation is less concise. The 1972 translation (reprinted in *Reboundings*) reads as: "Increasingly the topic of an exhibition tends to no longer be the exhibition of works of art, but the exhibition of the exhibition itself as a work of art". (Buren 1972).

2. While it seems inaccurate to reduce Buren's practice to 'about architecture', it is nevertheless almost always reliant on given physical structures. Of course the architecture (part of the artwork's context) could be said to play a more significant role in Buren's work than his famous 8.7cm stripes. Writing in *Reboundings*, Buren states "...the colour of the paper (white on white), although seemingly quite in harmony with the artworks surrounding it... was chosen... not on aesthetic grounds, but on the contrary for strategic reasons inherent in the aim pursued..." (Buren, 1977 39). In other words, the visual appearance of the artwork was only decided upon in direct response to the site of the exhibition itself, driven by Buren's concerns around the institution's tendency to imprint the work.

3. Again, it is a disservice to both artists to suggest that their work begins and ends with a mash-up of furniture and art. Gillick's political practice engages "with the context in ways that have a function and use-value. These two aspects of the work have always existed and have very little to do with participation or institutional critique." (Eccles, 2012 76)

4. Of course Smithson's work ultimately relies on the gallery system for its public dissemination and Broodthaers' 'outside' museum (*Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles*) would have appeared an eccentric folly if not viewed through institutions of art and recognised as a significant milestone in the progression of conceptual art.

5. An often referenced exception here is Peter Bil'ak's *Graphic Design in the White Cube*, which took place at the 22nd International Biennale of Graphic Design in Brno, 2006. Bil'ak's conceit for the exhibition was that invited participants were to create 'posters' specifically for the exhibition. "Instead of bringing work from the outside to the gallery, the work is made for the gallery. Instead of recreating the context for the exhibition, gallery conditions are the context for the work." (Bil'ak, 2006). The exhibition itself consisted of 'posters' (an archetypical form of graphic design, inside or outside the gallery), and process drawings, displayed on a series of frames that reinforced the framing that galleries perform. Each work was based on an 'A' paper size (first frame), then attached to aluminium sheets (second frame) attached to the wall (third frame), inside the gallery (fourth frame), in an overall context of a graphic design Biennale (fifth frame).

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