

Design Research

Nicole Chan

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Designers are part of the real world. We don't just serve the movement for a better world; we're a part of it. We aren't so high above everyone else that we can't see what is going on in the world and what we can do to make it better. I had never heard the term "Design Research" until I entered the Art Center MDP program, and once I did it was like coming home because I love authentic design and the idea of being able to translate the human voice through technology. My personal interests in design are broad but at the same time very focused. I want to empower individuals to transform society through the innovative use of digital media, storytelling, graphic design, and strategy, but still maintain a human element that people can relate to. I want to inspire others and help them envision a world where transformative social messages can rise to the top of the media marketplace. In this world that I envision, organizations and inspired individuals who seek to create lasting positive change and expose essential truths that can influence culture positively. I believe this mode of design could lead, inevitably, to a more sustainable, just, and tolerant society. I know that is a loaded belief but I feel this is a way that I can give back to society and bring issues to light in our world. "Society is so aggressive. It's very important to find a more spiritual way of living. What I can do personally is to insist on an artistic approach to design instead of the high-tech approach or the functional approach, so that my objects have a little bit of religion, a little bit of soul." (*Alessandro Mendini*) Humans want human interaction, they want to express themselves, and as designers I feel that it is important for us to help people and show them how to do this in a way that can produce beautiful results.

Designers give "form to ideas, craft delight, create thought, raise questions and encourage debate," this is what I've set out to do, and design research can be one of my vehicles.

The areas that most interest me in design research are when designers really dig into our culture and the people living in it. I'm drawn to this because I have always been fascinated by other people, how they think, feel, act, and how they react to certain situations. One method used in design research to do this is through ambiguity. Ambiguity is helpful to designers because we can design a piece to have several interpretations at once so it disrupts easy interpretation from the viewer and adds tension that must be resolved with a variety of outcomes. One contemporary example of this ambiguity that was used in a project that really intrigued me was the project called "The Blind" by Sophie Calle. Calle asked people that were born blind to express their "vision" of beauty. She takes photographs of them and shows their answers through photographs. These pieces are very interesting and it makes the viewer question the purpose behind her exposing these people's perceptions of beauty. Is it to make the people who see appreciate the beauty around us and not take it for granted? Is it to show how creative and insightful the mind is even if it has never seen our world with eyes? That's



The Blind, Sophie Calle

what is so interesting about this piece and Calle's work in general, she uses ambiguity to leave the viewer to come to his or her own conclusions. A more historical example of ambiguity used in design research is Duchamp's Fountain. The Fountain is a very controversial piece because it's so open for interpretation. On one side it is known as art that was the work of one of the 20th century's most well known artists. On the other side it is a toilet that is worth more than one million dollars. When you look at it you see a urinal, but you can also see the curves of it and view it as a sculpture. I feel it's a lot easier to

find examples of ambiguity within artwork, but it's more difficult to find sources of it in the modern day. Most commercial designers try to eliminate ambiguity from their products because they can't see it as strength. They want their products use to be clear and intuitive to the user. Ambiguity has its place in design research. It excites me because it makes me strive to produce work that can challenge peoples beliefs and make them ask themselves new questions that they may have never considered before viewing or interacting with a piece of work. This is a better way of getting a reaction I think to even the most controversial topics because you are forcing information into people, they are coming to conclusions on their own.

Another area of Design Research that is appealing to me is Visual Research. The idea that you can take existing work and conduct a study of a piece of visual communication and compare a collection to help expand a new idea or work is exciting. One designer that does this amazingly well is Ed Fella. Fella said, "Making art is good for the soul, the psyche, and the society..." I can relate to Fella because he went back to school to get his MFA, as did I, after working for many years. Granted he worked for 30 years before getting his degree and I only worked for 8, but all the same it is impressive that he had the drive to re-enter the education system after already accomplishing a full successful career in the industry. He has made serious contributions in Graphic Design, he has shown ambivalence and ambiguity, the multiple meanings of design as text and subtext, and that graphic designers are really artists. His work has also had an

important influence on contemporary typography. His book *Letters on America, Photographs & Lettering* gives insight into his idiosyncratic world by combining and juxtaposing examples of his unique hand lettering with his photographs of found vernacular lettering. This book in particular is an amazing example of Visual Research. His taxonomy of Polaroid's of different letters that he captures and documents brings a whole new insight to typography as well as documenting American history through signage and type.



Edward Fella, *Letters on America, Photographs & Lettering*

When the book *Learning to Love You More* was first introduced to us in class at the beginning of the semester as an example of Design Research, I was confused how a book full of photographs could be considered research. It was very difficult for me to so I went to the Library that afternoon and checked it out to spend some time with it and figure out how this book of photography was different from other photo books. Then I spent some time figuring out that this form of research was, to me, Naturalistic Observation. By giving people assignments like "take a flash photo under your bed," (there were a lot of animals under beds) "spend time with someone



Learning to Love You More

who is dying," "take a photo of your parents kissing," or "write a phone call you wish you could have had," it brings together a different kind of taxonomy. It has people show us their lives in natural form, whether that be through photo, observation, or thoughts. As the viewer we can compare and contrast the findings, but for me it boiled down to one answer. We are all more alike than different. This project made me laugh, cry and feel joy, but most of all it gave me a feeling of peace. *Learning to Love You More* does just that, makes you have faith and love for the human

race. I believe this is a significant contribution to the Naturalistic Observation research method of Design Research.

Another website project later turned into a book is called *Post Secret*. I feel this is another example of Naturalistic Observation and also a little bit of Visual Research. People send secrets that they have never told anybody on one side of a postcard and mail it to a PO Box in Gaithersburg, Maryland. There is a book out full of the work but there is also a website that is updated weekly with new “secrets.” Some of the secrets are hilariously funny, others are very disturbing in that they revealed.

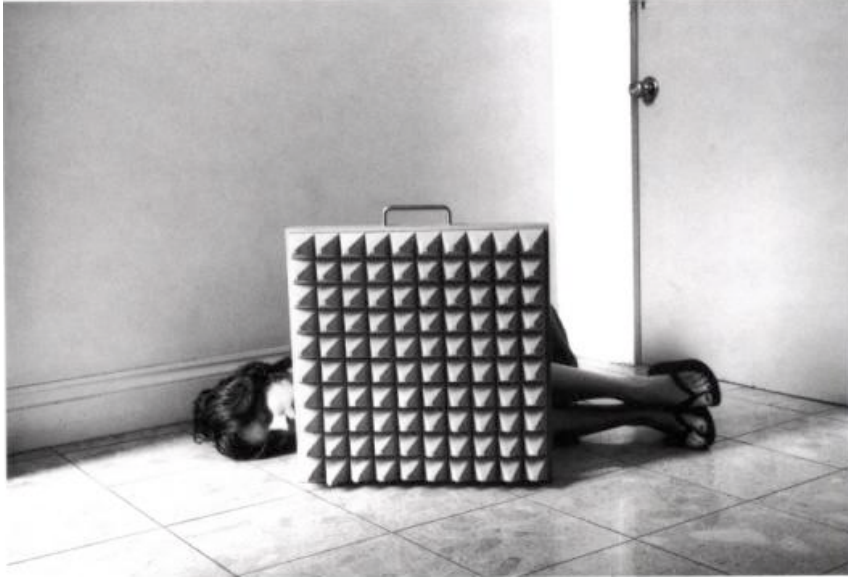
There are long-held secrets of various abuses by and toward others, and the resulting expressions of anger, regret, guilt and sadness throughout the book. The boldness of people reaching out through this medium made me read their secrets with some measure of trepidation. No doubt, when reading through the book and website people will recognize themselves, their desires and longings. This visually-stimulating book should be a wake up call to



Post Secret

everyone, that emotional mental health issues are inadequately addressed in our culture. The book is one step towards affirming that it's a positive and healing thing to get one's hidden issues “out there” and hopefully, examined. *Post Secret* is an advancement in Design Research, it brings awareness to issues in our culture through the work of the designers which are the general culture.

Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects is an example of more human generated Design Research, but instead of humans creating the artifacts they are interacting with them. The writers of the book, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, explore the way we interact with electronic objects, our environment, and other people. *Design Noir* focuses on how the psychological dimensions of experiences offered through electronic products can be expanded. These products would force a decision on the user, revealing how limited choices are usually hard-wired into products for us. It also focuses on how design products and services can function as a medium for producing complex psychological experiences. There are a variety of placebo projects addressed in the book that are interviews with the people that were willing to use the electrical objects given to them for a month. After the month was over they interviewed them to find out the users incorporate the placebo object into their lives. The placebo objects are designed to elicit stories about the secret life of the electronic object – both factual and



Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects

imagined. The point of this research study was that after living with a placebo project for a while the borrower would be encouraged to think about their environment differently, especially in relation to electromagnetic fields. “Designers cannot change reality, we can change people’s perception of it. They are real people, and anything we have discovered would be

grounded in the reality rather than fiction.”

When I was working in Washington, DC I saw Michael Jager present at an AIGA conference on the work his firm Jager, Di Poala, Kemp (JDK) produced. They have big clients like Burton, Microsoft, Merrell, Nike, and Patagonia. I have always admired this studio whose process is informed by emotional, rational, and cultural forces and whose focus centers on the idea that design distinction matters. JDK was one of the first studios to break the idea of the corporate brand having to be the same logo and tag line, and designed multiple variations on the Burton logo. In their original Burton print ads they rarely used the same logo twice and the messaging



Michael Jager

was often cryptic, sometimes even unintelligible to outsiders. JDK also uses design psychology, and cultural fluency to make their work strong. I'm using this design firm for an example of design research because I now understand on a social media level that this firm's theories of practice are based on a design epistemology that I have always been enamored with. JDK has done research on a theory for how to conduct their work called a "Living Brand." Jager says, "The Living Brand is about how to synchronize cultural ideas of a brand into a cross-fertilized form." Research has taught them that a brand "acts like a living organism. It is conceived and born, it develops and changes to adapt to its environment, enters relationships, has values, a unique identity, and a personality." They have tested this research that a brand is living and constantly evolving on their clients successfully. This is an example of research conducted for design, with an outcome that helps the design field expand by providing insight on how to evolve the way we design brands for clients.

The epistemological sources cited in this paper all have one common characteristic that appeals to me. The humanistic factor. This includes design by, for, or with, humans. I believe that all humans want human interaction, they want to express themselves. As designers I feel that it is important for us to help people, and show them how to do this in a way that can produce beautiful results. These design ideas can be expressed through such work as ambiguity, Visual Research, Naturalistic Observation, Design Research objects, or Social Media. People are also looking for authenticity. All of these methods of research have the capability to provide for people things they can relate to, things that are approachable and humanistic. My hope is that this humanistic branch of Design Research will continue to expand so that more people can feel connected and empowered.