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Professional Placement

Industry : Publishing and Journalism
Method : Field Work and Experience

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Writing this essay feels the same as the work I've done on this placement module. It also feels like what school has been like this past year. It feels the same on my arse (same chair), same on my fingers (same computer), and the same on my eyes (same stuff in my room, though to be fair, I can write this at night in my own time rather than working hours so it's darker). Am I trying to make some point about work in the modern world? The flexibility of technologically enhanced working environments? Or am I just complaining?

My "professional industry experience" felt like messaging the pen pal my year 9 German language teacher gave me in school, someone I've never met but I'm expected to learn from without any reason to trust them or any actual evidence supporting that they exist in the real world.

That being said, I'm complaining to myself. I can't complain about getting experience, getting anything at all was a good thing, but I chose to find work in an area to do with professional writing and such. An area of work already done from home, dependent on freelancers who develop their craft independently and denying they read anyone else's work, worried to associate with each other.

I liked the idea of writing. I like to read and I thought that writing would be fun or something, now though I see obviously I thought of being a writer in a romantic sense. It wasn't very fun, it is unclear if I was any good at it, and I missed feeling involved in something.

My first placement was with a magazine called

Disegno. Set up by Johanna Agerman-Ross, a curator at the V&A for the design department, Disegno is a quarterly design magazine that, on a scale of 1 to Goldsmiths Design, is 'quite' Goldsmiths Design.

My role : Research and writing.

The main team consists of 4 people. Oli Stratford, the editor, Evi Hall, the creative director, Chris Jones on publishing and, who was referred to as JAR, Johanna Agerman-Ross the boss.

The majority of my time was with Oli Stratford, though I attended every morning meeting with the whole team. I liked Oli, he was friendly and not very intimidating. One of those people I can respect without them needing to "carry presence in the room" or "find meaning in anything" or whatever. I would compare his character to Paul Graham and not just because of the similar circumstances but because PG is not a thrilling speaker while being a Thrilling writer and clever. I also don't agree with PG on most things. I once spoke to Oli about an essay he wrote on TV design and industry. I said I didn't like the Samsung Frame because I thought it dishonest and he said he would agree with me if he had a reason. I thought this interesting, I suppose he feels he needs a fully formed argument for a justified opinion and I wondered if this was a writing thing.

<http://www.paulgraham.com/>

During my time with them I was mainly involved in four tasks.

(Task 1) Contributing to the "timeline". At the beginning of each edition of the magazine they do a section consisting of 150 word summaries of things "Significant to design". I worked on producing 3 or 4 of these, 2 of which were good enough for the magazine.

I spent a long time on the first one, a piece about This year's Serpentine Pavilion. There is a definite "design story" there but, as you can see in my work document, I really struggled. Journalistic writing has to be many things, short, entertaining, informative, concise.

I couldn't make it have a point and be entertaining at the same time, Oli ended up telling me to move on and leave it, which has frustrating but to be fair, I had spent two entire days on rewriting the same 150 words.

I found it easier to write about things I hate, such as Jeff Bezos.

Earlier this year we saw Jeff Bezos announce he would step down as CEO of e-commerce giant Amazon, citing a need for more “time and energy” to focus on other ventures. One of these ventures being to launch himself and his mates 100km (62 miles) up into space. Blue Origin, the private aerospace manufacturer founded by Bezos is developing reusable spacecraft in order to “go to space to tap its unlimited resources and energy”. Of course, an essential part of the development of such technological advancements is for a \$28mil charity auction bidder to hitch a 10 minute ride with a 57 year old man and his bro, doing a once around the old block in his shiny new multistage whip. Bezos can see there’s nothing much left for him on earth and he might have seen the petition on change.org; “Do not allow Jeff Bezos to return to Earth”. Maybe he could consider not coming back down?

This below one was a good one to write about, lots of online opinions to absorb and it was easy to find my own take. Oli told me that these ones in the timeline work very well and are enjoyed because it will be such a hot but fleeting event in the art and design world. When this issue is released in September-October time, readers will delight in remembering the gossip and ridicule of the moment a few months ago.

“I can not accept people’s unsubstantiated assertions that they are in fact the opposite sex to when they were born and deserve to be extended the same rights as if they were born as such.” So said textile artist Jesse de Wahls in 2019, writing in what has since been widely seen as an anti-trans rights blog post. After the post attracted renewed online criticism earlier this year, London’s Royal Academy (RA) responded by posting an Instagram story announcing that it was pulling de Wahls’ textiles from its gift shop, before performing a U-turn and apologising, citing “the protection for free speech”. The RA’s botched response sadly distracted from the debate surrounding Wahls’ misguided views, enabling her to go on national radio to quip, “I don’t want to go down the route so many ‘woke warriors’ are going, that an apology is not enough, this is a big deal.” Perhaps the RA could have handled its initial response less performatively – did it need its own Instagram post? – but by then rowing back on this they’ve inadvertently justified Wahls rhetoric without necessarily agreeing with her.

(Task 2) Research into finding speakers and contributors for a round table discussion on the Swedish architect Sigurd Lewerentz. This was for an event at ArkDes, the Swedish museum of architecture.

My success was in plundering journals for Lewerentz’s name that Evi Hall did not have access to.

interesting to discuss, actually talk and consider the best way to construct the event, a bit more what I used to at school.

(Task 3) Disegno Daily is their site on which they post more straight cut design journalism. When the winners of the London Design Biennale were announced, I wrote the story up for it to be published on the site the same day.

I didn’t like this task. It felt far more soulless than the other tasks I’d been doing but I was made aware of the importance of the magazine’s ‘online presence’ and ‘daily content’. People these days have no attention span and a shitty memory, I suppose from media over-saturation or something, and if the social media guy doesn’t post often enough on the company social media account people will instantly forget the existence of the company. I found the results on the LDB twitter and everything else on their site. This piece was pretty much a regurgitated Dezeen article on the same thing because at first I struggled to structure the article. Evi Hall said that the information should be important at the top and less at the bottom. I really wanted to talk about how it was interesting that Isreal got the public vote, especially after having been and seen all of the pavilions myself, but this was a purely informational article.

This year’s London Design Biennale (LDB) Four pavilions have been awarded medals out of the 30 pavilions which have been showcased. These were awarded on the 24th of June and announced online on the London Design Biennale twitter account.

Teams have designed pavilions and installations in response to the Theme “Resonance” which this year’s London Design Biennale’s artistic director Es Devlin has briefed. “We live in an age of hyper resonance, the consequences of which are both exhilarating and devastating. Everything we design and everything we produce resonates.” Devlin explains how her theme is about a consideration of the wider

reach and impact of design.

The main award for "the most outstanding overall contribution" went to the pavilion Tectonic Resonance from Chile. The LDB website states "Viewers will be invited to think about this primal act of producing sounds with stones, and show how the techniques, languages, and ontologies of our own culture merge in the simplicity of this act."

The Theme medal for the best interpretation of Es Devlin's theme "Resonance" went to Venezuela's pavilion - La Rentrada. "La Rentrada proposes an economy (and an identity) for this post-petroleum era. One around a material that is free and readily available in Venezuela: avocado seeds. Utilising appropriate technology and local resources that are normally discarded or unutilized like seaweed, seashells, starches and sugars, avocado seeds can be used to create a wide range of materials, objects and applications spanning all sectors of the economy. From an alternative clay to make bricks and adobe, to plastic, leather and glass substitutes and even electricity and oil for powering vehicles."

Best Design Medal was awarded to the pavilion of African Diaspora. "The structure takes the form of a sail and is a symbolic gateway to the past, present, and future in the exploration of Reparations + Representations = Repair & Resonance to energise our sail and carry us on our continued journey onward."

In the public voted Medal competition, the award went to Israel's Pavilion - The Boiler Room. "Israel's pavilion will explore the perpetual tension between Globalisation (Networking) and Nationalism (Capsularisation), how they overlap and ignite each other, leading us to an imminent boiling point."

(Task 4) By the end, I was tasked with a longer piece of my own choice. I chose to write about Love Island. The show had started and one of my house mates is obsessed with reality TV. Oli Stratford liked this idea but asked what made it specifically a design story. I'd read a Wired article about the app, an app that me and my house mates had all downloaded, on which you can vote for which contestants you like, who you want to stay, opinion polls on things people have said on the show. The app also allows you to buy items that you see on the show. When the contestants change outfit on the show, the outfit pops up on the app, the same with a whole host

of other products. I thought there was something interesting dystopian about this that I could examine in a written piece and Oli Stratford agreed.

Oli said my piece was interesting, but insincere. I said this is true because the topic is indeed those two things. There is nothing truly wrong about Love Island, it would be pointless for me to argue against the existence of the show and things like it. The show is just a symptom of a fully commercialised society, laughably easy to compare to exaggerated fictional commentary such as the Truman Show. Oli was saying that for the article to have a place in the magazine it would need to have a bolder angle other than base commentary, which was fair enough. I had learnt from the Timeline writing that I was much more capable of writing about things I did not like, basically just complaining, and here I had learnt that I would need more than just complaining to make a worth while point.

<https://www.wired.co.uk/article/love-island-app-tv>

My second placement was with Alex Kirby and Swift Press. Alex is a freelance book cover designer who was working on a few covers over the time I was with him. Through him I got to talk with editor Diana Broccardo from Swift Press, the publisher of the book we were producing the cover for.

Alex Kirby is quite an impressive name and he had lot of people to pass me onto, he's worked for Yale, Penguin, he did Luke Harding's book covers, some of which I had read.

With Alex Kirby I got to see professional briefs, the one I was working on was a fiction with the working title "Happy Fifth". Alex admitted he had only skimmed it and made vague notes from particularly visual moments he passed. He got me to do the same but I took the time to read it properly and I noted down everything I could and all the ideas I had along the way. I think the book was alright. I haven't read fiction in a while, other than things like The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist, and I supposed this is meant to be a light read, easy and fun.

Alex Explained there was a massive oversight about the cover coming across non-fiction. The editor had in the original brief wanted a "human face protruding from a petri dish", and

then the first edit to Alex's brief (before starting anything) had been a title change from "Happy Fifth" to "Quarantine". You see, the story in the book is about two individual's experiences of the aftermath of a worldwide pandemic (completely unrelated to the real one and very different). Surely anyone would be able to realise that a book called "Quarantine" which has a petri dish on the cover would come across as though it was about Covid-19, Non-Fiction, which is a very different audience to the one that wants the sex-filled, character-driven fiction book that it is. Dialogue with the editor resolved this, and more freedom was delivered to Alex to devise a more original cover, one that would carry less connotations of the real world.

There were a few good ideas I had from my note taking of the book. Fiction will often start with a lot of setting the scene, and therefore plenty of visual descriptions that foreshadow or simlilise the people or events of the book. One of these were the stacked mirrors and clocks on street corners, which the characters had gotten rid of to reduce reminders of coming death. Stacks of mirrors and clocks. Alex thought this good, but could be difficult to execute. The best way would be to do purely graphically, as photographing piles of clocks and mirrors would take a lot of resources and could come across to rugged and eclectic. I spent good time trying to collage a good amount of clocks and mirrors to no good outcome.

One other idea was based on a moment in the book in which two characters have sex through a plastic screen. I thought this a good moment to represent the novel since there was some sex scene or similar every other page or so, and sex through the plastic screen was a good exaggerated show of the unlikable compromises that we similarly had to endure in the real pandemic. Alex told me to ask the editor, who replied with a no. Despite there being plenty of sex in the novel, she said that there was more to it than sex.

Alex didn't like calling or facetime. Previously, I'd met him IRL but over the time I was working with him, we called 3 times and never with cameras on. In fact, it was only the editor who's face I saw for the brief time she was advising me. The majority of our communication was via email, several times a day and at completely unexpected times. Alex would send me back through my covers with notes at half one in the morning.

The success I had in my book covers were in the super quick ones I drew up using Alex's advice. He showed me a few ways in which I could devise a good cover which would follow on from the mindmapping and planning we'd done since reading the brief. He encouraged me to use real texture, photographs and such, and combine it with vivid graphics as a way to build an fantasy upon reality, something he said was good for a book that is meant to feel situated in the alternate but real world.

I enjoyed my time with Alex Kirby and I learnt a lot. It was the a good opportunity that presented itself to me in which I could spy the publishing industry and graphics. I learnt how Alex Kirby, a professional designer, worked, and I read briefs and consulted with editors on changes to real projects. I was a bit like just chatting with people online really, because it was mostly all done over emails.

Writing, at its best, is a lonely life.

In conclusion, I don't think I have really developed an amazing futher understanding of my industry in question though perhaps I did develop my skills. I think probably if I'd wanted to garner experience in my field, I should have followed the advice of the Alex Kirby or Aaron Panasar, who I talked to for advice earlier this year, both of which kept pointing me towards junior internships which last 6 months or so, stick it out while it's remote and then when everyone gets back to the office I can absorb experience as people did back in the old days. They gave me this advice because it was what I asked for, but Alex Kirby and Disegno have been working remotely since before the pandemic. Alex is freelance and hasn't worked not from home since 2015 and Disegno had had trouble renting an office when they work fairly effectively remote. I think I glimpsed a fairly real side of the industry without an actually stepping in to it. I glimpsed it through my screen.