

## **Design Research: Methods and Perspectives**

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### **Speculation, Serendipity and Studio Anybody**

Book Chapter by Lisa Grocott

To state that I once hated graphic design is neither, provocative nor original. Many graphic designers before me, have felt the physical and creative malaise I experienced after twelve-hour days of mouse-clicking week in, week out. This chapter describes the creative equivalent of a recovery program for disenchanting designers. This story narrates how my colleagues and I conceived of an ongoing research project, that positioned our studio practice as the research subject, our professional dissatisfaction as the primary issue and calling for creative speculation within the workplace as our key argument.

After graduating I had a series of in-house jobs, so although I couldn't even complain about hours spent costing budgets or tolerating clients, I was still disillusioned by a profession that seemed to only fractionally be about designing. You see, as a student it was the verb that I had fallen for—not the typefaces, the software or the paper samplers—I fell in love with the process of creating designs, from the slow-burning hours of contemplation, the heady rush of possible ideas, to the focused, micro world of refinement. But driven by a weekly production schedule my designs had become more formulaic—consequently my job dissatisfaction intensified. It became obvious that I needed to reclaim a design process that valued speculation, an experimental yet investigative space, where design could once again reside in what Clive Dilnot refers to as the 'realm of possibility' [Dilnot,1998:24]. Unoriginally, my response was to enroll at grad school.

To escape operating systems and production deadlines, I chose a fine art program where I could explore communication and authorship, while dreaming big and remembering the potential of the creative process. As I was organized and good at thinking strategically, I was confident I would be the model student—until it became apparent that these qualities were more a liability in a painting masters. One day when presenting my ideas and plans for the whole semester, the look on my supervisor's face confirmed the disturbing extent to which my professional life had trained me to efficiently predetermine every phase of a project. Unfortunately it took the duration of my masters to unlearn the insidious habit of projecting outcomes before I had even started creating, but in the process I began to identify the distinctive quality of discovery in art and design. By experimenting and investigating ideas *through* my form making, it became possible to surpass superficially reworking the familiar, to explore and discover the unfamiliar. Terrence Rosenberg theorizes this experience by critiquing the way a straight line of intent defines a narrow focal channel for speculation, instead advocating a poetic research method where non-linear links seek alternative paths to those predicted from the outset [Rosenberg, 2000:5]. Simply translated into industry speak, this discovery-led process can herald the distinction between simple invention and true innovation.

Doing time within an institution that advocates an iterative, discovery-led process for designing, unfortunately also sets up a stumbling re-entry into the commercial world, that insists on abruptly reminding us that the client's deadline was always yesterday. It became immediately apparent that if my retreat to the academy were to be of sustaining value, I would have to reconfigure my professional practice to continually accommodate a space for

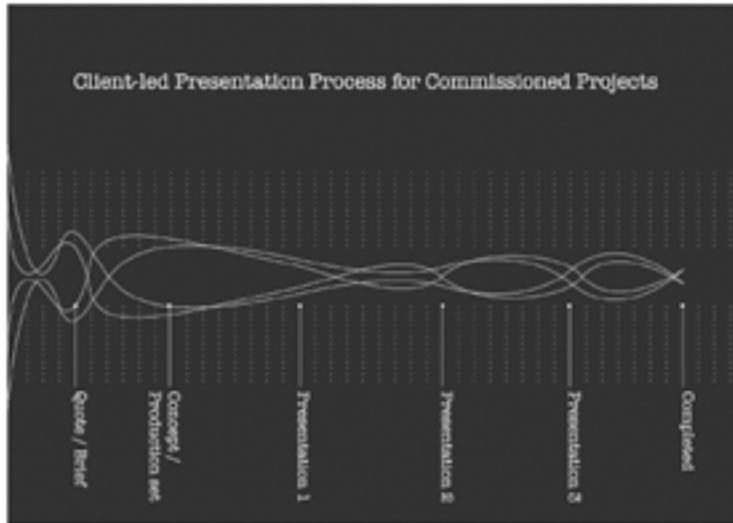
speculative design enquiry. In setting out to foster a culture of research within a professional studio I hoped to weave together the time for experimentation and reflection afforded within the academy, the framed critical inquiry of the research lab, with the professional imperatives of the corporate R&D department.

In establishing Studio Anybody, a small independent graphic design consultancy with five equal partners, it became a commercial imperative that we not divorce the value of the speculative research from the specific realities of a corporate environment. We were convinced that if practitioner research intended to build strategic knowledge about design—the central contribution of most research—it made sense that the research be through the activity of designing. While not contesting the contribution of the theoretician’s research *about* design, or the marketing departments research *for* design, we were interested in the space between the academy and the user, where the professional designer deploys studio-based research to actively investigate the activity of designing. If the graphic design professional ‘community of practice’ ultimately values creative, innovative design, it is important that the community’s investment in research align with this professional endeavor and extend to research *through* design. The Studio Anybody case study presented in this chapter, references a diversity of research findings that will hopefully illustrate how tacit understanding about creative speculation can inform and enhance tangible knowledge about design practice.

### **In what ways can a professional design studio foster a speculative culture?**

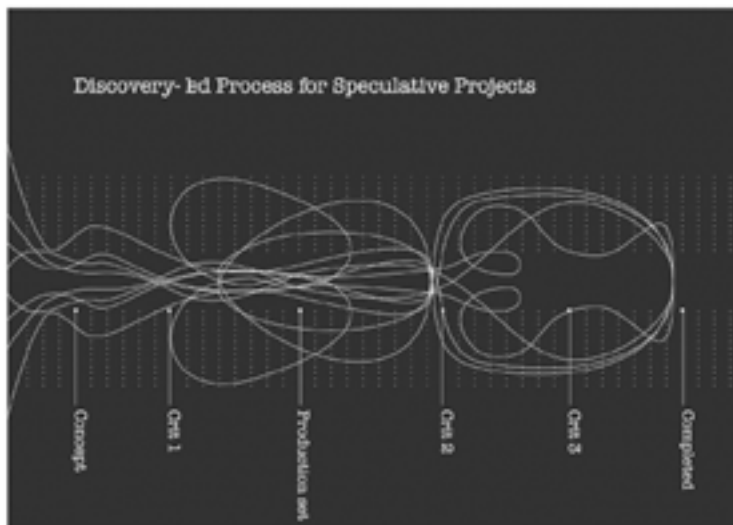
At Studio Anybody we were young enough to be naïve about business models, yet experienced enough to be cynical about business practice. Our desire was to develop, implement and reflect upon a critically enhanced practice model that accommodated a discovery-led process—to do this we deployed cyclical, action research where the process of designing the artifact constituted the research methodology [Seagro and Dunne 1999]. The research study intended to explore a particular and subtle configuration of inter-related and inter-dependent design activities that sought to ‘naturalize’ the professional relationship between speculative research and commercial activity.

Our first move was to develop a space for speculation, by initiating a stream of design projects that were authored and funded by the studio. We believed that the pure, client-free space of the studio-initiated projects would help us to elucidate in what ways, and to what extent, the design process we adopt directly informs the artifacts we create. The original business model hoped that the rhizomatic, poetic nature of the speculative stream would generate a reservoir of ideas that could be drawn on by the commissioned client stream—ultimately valuing the accounted for hours on our timesheets [Rosenberg 2000]. The studio’s main presumption was that the prescribed nature of the design process down the path most traveled, was an account management method that sort to provide the client with something known and familiar, but expediently constrained designers to design around what they already knew. If we could only decelerate the process enough to experiment and reflect outside of the time-starved treadmill of client projects, we thought, we could better understand how to polish and reclaim an iterative, creative process within a commercial context. The relative professional value of the study would depend upon whether the poetic process could afford the designers enough contemplative space to explore and refine culturally more effective communication. In turn, confirming speculative research as an investment that offers direct return on enriching the professional culture and enhancing the commissioned projects. {Anne if there is room, this is where I would insert the charts I also gave you on the CD – if they end up being really small I suggest taking the small text off them, leaving the titles and lines}.



**Chart 01: Client-led Presentation Process for Commissioned Projects**

The dotted section of a client-led process represents the limited space for speculation within a predominantly predetermined, reductive design process.



**Chart 02: Discovery-led Process for Speculative Projects**

The dotted section of a design-led process represents the possibilities afforded within the space for speculation in this poetic, iterative design process.

### **What role can speculation play within workplace education?**

By now I was also director of a graduate program and at Studio Anybody, so I was not interested in accepting the didactic rationale that positioned academic speculation in opposition to professional application. I wanted to know if it were possible that the blue-sky experience of pure speculation could reveal to designers a reality about design that we often shortsightedly compromised in our never-ending quest to seduce new clients with bigger budgets?

Designer's initiating their own speculative projects is not in itself a new idea; from underground zines to internationally distributed publications, it is easy to find examples of designer's creating a client-free space. More challenging perhaps, is finding critical speculation that would fall within the research notion of *scholarship*, where outcomes are critiqued and disseminated within the relevant community. For this reason, we framed our research questions and methodology in association with my other workplace, RMIT University, because the educational

context for research would situate our ongoing analysis and reflection within a community of scholarship. The formal research culture of the academy asserted that the professional research be more than just indulgent, introspective speculation. Calling the designers to articulate the projects purchase, not just for enhancing our client work, but also its contribution to the greater community of practice. The culture of learning and research that the university modeled became increasingly woven into the fabric of the studio. Our declared scholarly agenda internally directed the practitioner / researchers commitment to critical speculation, while externally building and sharing strategic knowledge about the business of communication design.

This chapter specifically refers to the studio's initial research study, which was framed by the big picture question: what happens when discovery-led research becomes an integral component of professional graphic design practice? In the initial stages the research bluntly impresses broad structural and procedural changes to the conventional business model, whereas within this cycle of action and reflection the latter stages of the study determined a shift toward a more complex and subtle reconfiguring of the professional design process.

### **Could critical speculation be the foundation for a business strategy?**

For phase one of the study, we responded to our ambitions to develop an enhanced critical, creative professional position, by authoring, designing and disseminating studio-initiated, client-free projects. The speculative stream of experimental projects, were conceived to power the creative process and formal language behind our commissioned client projects. For the first few years the Studio disseminated these projects through public and exhibition spaces, because we believed this client-free environment afforded the researching designers a contemplative space to develop our own body of work. The extended timeframe of the projects supported a discovery-led process, where the outcomes were not pre-determined and the designers could embrace an iterative practice. This accommodated revisiting and further investigating conceptual and formal threads that began to run through all our projects. Within a short time, qualitative evidence implied that the adoption of a poetic process was directly improving our job satisfaction, critical reflection and professional development. The luxury of being able to resolve projects to our satisfaction motivated us to learn new software, negotiate healthy collaborations, refine experimental form and, most noticeably, to collectively develop a body of work that forms the basis of the conceptual threads we still return to today. We were seduced by authoring our own content and with a newfound confidence we proceeded to design projects that accelerated our practice faster than if we had relied on clients to give the young studio a break. The following projects mark and highlight three particular phases the research study moved through, revealing how the commercial and cultural design strategies, conceived as practical experiments, continued to enhance our professional practice in a multiplicity of ways.

### **To what ends can play be good business practice?**

Clearly and immediately the projects began to inform the commissioned work, most noticeably with the public projects inadvertently operating as a new business strategy. La Lala La was one such public project that attracted our first international campaign. Our relationship with Mooks Clothing Co., like other accounts introduced to us through the public projects, profited from being founded on the clients heightened expectations of the ideas we played with in our authored projects. The 1999 La Lala La project, explored foiled romantic love through a world of pop culture. As the Studio splits into romantics and cynics, we conceived of this exhibition around the idea of how your reading of music and movies emotionally responds to the state of your love life. The installation presented mixed tapes behind glass cabinets, that at one end had love songs like 'Endless Love 2' on cassette labels, while break up songs like 'There

Is No Me without You’ were pasted over the tapes as you walked through the exhibition space. Printed drop-cards reproduced the song titles and were distributed around cafés and bars, leading the audience to a web animation, that explored similar territory by playing out the getting together and breaking up of a relationship—illustrated by the video rental transaction history of two people. When Mooks Clothing Co. came across La Lala La they responded to the playful intimacy of the open-ended pop cultural references, recognizing how successfully the humorous, familiar tone of the communication would engage their diverse audience. Our working relationship with the street-wear label was founded on their appreciation of our conceptual threads, so this new account became an invitation to revisit and refine them further—speaking to their audience through an excessive collection of pop illustrations that, like the exhibition, invited each individual to complete the narrative [groccotto1.tif].



**Research for new business strategy**

Left: detail from “La lala la” studio-initiated public project [1999]  
 Right: detail from Mooks Clothing Co. fall / winter catalogue [2000]

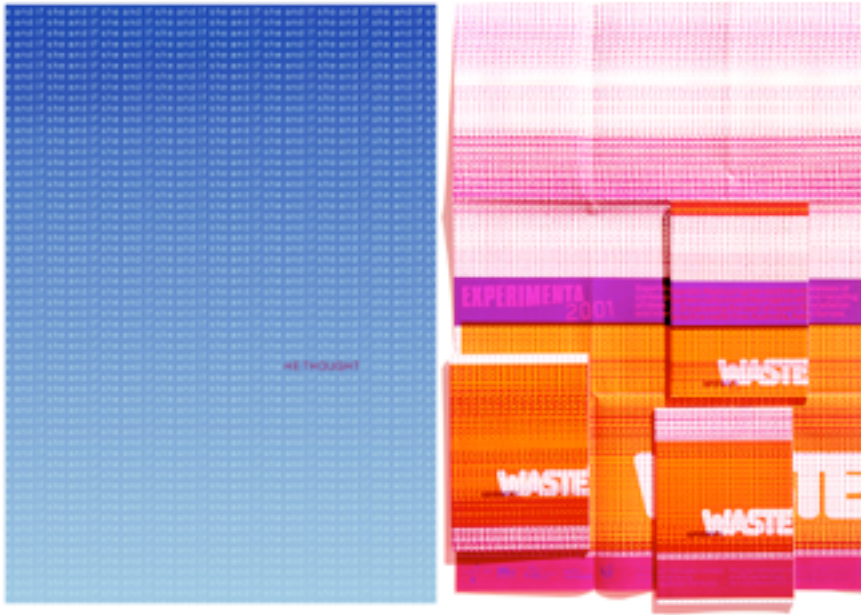
With the Studio receiving good publicity and drawing in like-minded clients, the designers felt inspired and challenged—it appeared as if the research study’s practice model of speculative public projects alongside commissioned client ones was a success. Yet, although job satisfaction was everything when we started, we soon began to ask to what extent had the Studio’s business practice had really been enhanced? There was no real critical leverage from this improved client list if the studio model continued to artificially distinguish between the pure studio-initiated projects and the real-world jobs. The studio could continue to author public projects that influenced the conceptual, formal and material literacy of the design projects, but how did this educate us about the professional practice of design? What was the relevance of this structure if the designers were not convinced that the discovery-led process could ever translate to the structured schedule of a client relationship? If this practice model was to have fiscal purchase, it was imperative we distil what we knew about the speculative process to find a way to embed this sustaining, rich way of working into our client projects.

**Is speculation time central to the contribution and merit of any designed artifact?**

The consequences of promoting speculation outside of the client projects raised questions, during a critique within the academy, about the current Studio structure. Dutch graphic designer Linda van Deursen questioned the instrumental structure that divided the studio-initiated from the client-led projects, since she argued that the potential of design lay in unfamiliar outcomes. Although the speculative projects presented unfamiliar artifacts, van Deursen lamented that the commissioned projects seemed well worn, like she had seen them before. Her argument was simply that innovative, engaging design required time for experimentation, so design would always be reduced to predictable solutions if designers attempted to shortcut this process. Although we concurred with van Deursen's critique, it was still daunting to contest the didactic studio model that, may have compromised the client projects, but had significantly secured a safe haven for experimentation. Dutch designers are often empowered by the commissioning client to develop the design independently, whereas we were not so sure it was possible to protect a discovery-led process, if we were to conform with the work-in-progress client presentation culture of Australian design. What would enhance the design process and outcomes further—greater authority for the designers or a tighter collaboration with the client? Although we hoped to contest the deferential service model, we had too much invested in a discursive creative process, to feel comfortable acting out the role of the authoritative designer. If these options were not mutually exclusive, could we negotiate an inclusive relationship with clients that supported the democratic, propositional style of the designs we created?

Phase two of the research study addressed this issue by swinging away from structural models, to reconsider how we facilitated the design process with our clients. We had to learn how to negotiate and assert a new kind of client collaboration that would legitimate speculation within the commercial projects. A long-time client, the design literate director of the media arts foundation Experimenta, became our first guinea pig. An open discussion of our respective reservations was initiated, pointing out a desire to include the client in the process, but at the same time assert authority over how we directed that process. The board of directors was asked to give us the creative license they would unquestioningly extend to artists selected for exhibition, relinquishing their right to assert decisions throughout the development of the design. The proposition was that a poetic process that afforded the designers time to see where the process would take them would best support the production of critically intelligent and effective communication that would serve to do more than just announce their international exhibition.

Central to developing a new account management model was our decision to abandon the convention of showing the client a range of options, liberating the designers from the outset to only pursue ideas they collectively saw merit in. We also dismissed the client presentation model that reduced the design process to a series of formally approved decisions at each stage of the project, since it limited the design to something familiar that you could be assured would work. But we wished meet regularly with the client, so we consciously referred to the meetings as critiques and adopted a discursive culture where ideas were openly rejected, recanted or revisited as the project evolved. Run similarly to how we negotiated the studio-initiated project critiques, our commitment was to listening and considering the client's comments alongside the designers, in a spirit of partnership where all voices were equal.



***Research for formal reservoir***

Left: detail from “He thought, He felt—Something” studio-initiated poster [2001]

Right: collection of promotional material for Experimenta’s Waste exhibition [2001]

This model allowed us to develop a concept for the exhibition called Waste, where we recycled formal ideas tested in an earlier studio project and renegotiated the production budget around repeatedly reusing the print plates [groccotto2.tif]. By allowing the studio to work on the same critical terms as the artists, albeit relative to design criteria, the commission expanded and challenged the audiences perception of the role graphic design can play. With consensus from the client and the design community that the process had allowed the work to rise above the standard of previous work the client had commissioned, it began to seem possible that a commercial design process could sustain both a designer’s creativity and engage the client’s audience.

**To what extent can a discovery-led design process be deployed in commercial practice?**

In this phase we had successfully renegotiated our client relationships, but now we had to address the other half of the speculation equation and accommodate the poetic nature of discovery in our client projects. Although being allowed to run with one idea had assigned us more authority, the process had still precluded speculation beyond the front end of the project. What became essential in phase three was our ability to intuitively and analytically, articulate to our clients the nature of the pure design process the studio-initiated projects had privileged us to experience. We needed to consider whether a client could be persuaded to value unplanned, unsettling, unfamiliar discovery. Unable to contrive this next step, we just had to be open to serendipity at any stage within the process.

The opportunity came along with the arts program for the Melbourne Fashion Festival, when one day after the final design had been approved but before production, we joked amongst ourselves about an alternative idea we should have proposed. The festival director and program curator had both endorsed a beautiful, safe design that was an intentionally restrained take on the theme Excess and Exuberance—our new idea was to controversially illustrate the excessive consumer hype and marketing budgets that drive the fashion industry [groccotto3.tif]. Our quipped idea was

a critique of the ever-increasing power afforded sponsors in the communication material we produced for the festival—and as soon as we thought of it we knew it could work. As we began to mock-up the new idea, I had to defend our position to our nervous project manager, who was not convinced I could persuade a client that an innovative design process, by necessity, had to accommodate happenstance. Rewardingly however, the client required no persuasion, immediately valuing the cultural commentary of the unfamiliar design, recognizing the enhanced communication of the last-minute idea.



***Research for cultural critique***

Left: detail from work-in-progress Melbourne Fashion Festival arts program [2003]

Right: last-minute design for Melbourne Fashion Festival arts program [2003]

Although this research study formally concluded some years back, strategic knowledge continues to be revealed, because the Studio agenda of research, learning and innovation, cultivated the designer's sophisticated, experiential understanding of how to observe the nexus between commercial practice, creative process and the designed artifact. As the director of a graduate program I always questioned whether integrating research within a professional environment could soften the demarcation between the discrete, experimental experience of grad school and the applied, commercial context of the profession? The research study presented here convinced myself and my colleagues of the personal and collective value of research through design, with our commitment to research currently represented by a series of more specific, short-term projects—in diverse areas such as exploring a discursive form of graphic activism to questioning how sub-cultures and mainstream culture talk to each other. Perhaps after all, undertaking research training within the workplace can offer a positive model for fostering lifelong learning beyond the walls of the academy.

In writing up and disseminating this particular study to the professional community, we are conscious that project-based design research is often undermined by a misguided attempt to abstract findings to meaningless generalizations of practice. For these reasons the rich reflections presented here intentionally acknowledge the

situation specific, unique nature of every design situation. However, we consider many of the strategies and observations documented, to be scalable to larger companies or transferable to other design disciplines—because designing is all about possibilities and should never be reduced to a twelve-step program.

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