

## **Becoming**

### Special Issue Introduction

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[...] the 'curatorial' is most often expressed with reference to modes of becoming – research-based, dialogical practices in which the processual and serendipitous overlap with speculative actions and open-ended forms of production. (O'Neill & Wilson, 2015, p. 12)

Over recent decades, Universities and Design Schools as part of those institutions, have responded to rapid external change by radically transforming and re-inventing their principles, policies and practices in order to better reflect the global social and environmental challenges of our age. As academics we are citizens who enjoy the huge privilege of being able to educate and inspire future generations through our teaching and research. As such we have a duty to explore how we can change the networks, organisations and institutions in which we are embedded to bring about a more equitable and sustainable society. Big data, climate change, migration and social injustice are issues which have necessitated urgent responses and a reframing of everything we do.

The Design School is one of three schools with Media and Screen which make up the academic provision at the London College of Communication, University of the Arts London. The School is comprised of undergraduate and postgraduate courses in graphic design communication; interaction design and visual communication; and branding and design innovation. Our School ethos builds on the aesthetic traditions of design practice and encourages experimentation, critique and innovation within the context of a post-digital culture. We are an inclusive and multidisciplinary community of educators, researchers and practitioners with approximately 2000 students and 100 permanent academic staff.

On becoming Dean in 2016 I made it a priority to gain a deeper understanding of what Design School colleagues were concerned about, what issues they were tackling through research, practice and teaching and what motivated them to do this important work. I hoped that this knowledge would elucidate a sense of what was possible to achieve together, enable better infrastructural support to be provided, build our reputation and open up greater possibilities to take action in the world. What I learned was that Design School colleagues were passionate about a multiplicity of issues, across a diversity of platforms and production processes and united in their commitment to design for positive change through research, practice and pedagogy.

The London Design Festival (LDF) of 2016 provided a timely opportunity to make public the tangible and intangible manifestations of this research and to create a space to explore

productive tensions and meaning-making in a wide-ranging group show. LDF is an annual event in which UAL regularly participates and which promotes London as a global design destination and home to a range of vibrant creative communities. At London College of Communication, LDF had up until 2016 predominantly featured individual and/or travelling shows. This was a chance to open up participation, to include and combine different forms of knowledge and move beyond a somewhat reductive understanding of research towards a more inclusive and nurturing platform of exchange.

From a personal perspective, my teaching and PhD had focussed on museums and curating and I was excited by the prospect of using the exhibition/festival in its widest sense to explore with colleagues what a Design School could be. The 2016 Design School contribution to LDF was called 'Design Research' and featured an exhibition and publication of the work and research interests of over 60 academic and technical staff. Everyone was welcome to submit an output in their medium of choice and the work was showcased in a democratic and non-hierarchical mode where all participants were equally valued under the epithet – "Experience the collective knowledge of LCC staff where design creativity resides not in the one but the many".

'Design Research' provided a public space and moment in time to consider the ongoing active work across the School, to prompt new conversations, deliberations and collaborations and to map out shared interests and constellations of concern. LDF contributions from 2017-19 developed further the four research groupings identified in 'Design Research' which were: Critical Design and Digital Futures; Design for Sustainability and Social Innovation; Design Cultures, Histories and Futures; Design Communications and Practice; with Design Pedagogies embedded throughout. These were loose groupings with porous boundaries and a flexible membership where different voices came to the fore at different times in complex interactions across multi-layered projects often involving external partners and extended timeframes.

Each exhibition to some extent built on the previous one, questioning existing discourses, methodologies, paradigms and taxonomies, deepening insights and encouraging dialogic engagement with topics of shared concern. 'Uncertainty Playground' was our 2017 contribution to the London Design Festival, which considered how design could define, address and make meaning from the ambiguities and uncertainties that we currently face. The exhibition was comprised of four shows Possible/Probable Worlds, S\*PARK, Room 2084 and FutureMakers which explored the role of design research and practice in envisioning, critiquing and shaping futures. In addition to installations and displays, our tool box of curatorial practices was extended to include performances, actions, workshops, talks, symposia, blogs, publications and podcasts.

In 2018 we hosted our most ambitious LDF exhibition and series of events to date. We launched our new manifesto, a new research platform called Supra Systems Studio which emerged from the Critical Design and Digital Futures grouping (a community of academics, practitioners and students interested in the politics of network technologies, Artificial Intelligence and machine learning) and featured a range of open processes, research and experiments that responded to the current condition of intense activity and accelerated change where – 'Everything Happens So Much' - the latter being the name of the show. Each LDF show has an overall theme and visual identity communicated through exhibition graphics, website, show guide, and campaign marketing material. The theme is broad enough to encourage optimum participation and is supported by sub-projects moderated through a collective curatorial process involving different levels of collaboration.

Having undertaken a comprehensive review of our subject areas and operating structures in response to the changing landscape of design; 2018 seemed an appropriate moment to set out

our beliefs as an academic community and Design School. Building on the written convention of the manifesto as a powerful tool of polemic and experimentation and holding to the spirit of collective endeavour, the new manifesto was written by staff across the School through collaborative document editing. The current iteration is a distillation of those beliefs into eight statements - a work in progress that is contingent and open to critique, contestation and debate. It is a call to action that is never closed, always in flux and a dynamic expression of what we believe as a creative community of critically and socially engaged practitioners and researchers.

The manifesto formed the centrepiece of 'Everything Happens So Much' with each of the eight manifesto statements displayed throughout the exhibition in bold graphics. The visual identity of the show communicated the notion of flux through a system that used the language of the manifesto to generate disruptive, iterative and provocative manifestations in print and digital form. The contingent nature of the manifesto was enacted through invitations to our various audiences to participate in its making and re-making by providing their own perspectives on the eight statements we had collectively produced as a School. Opportunities to do this happened through student-led activities, guest lecturer critiques and an open invitation to share responses on our interactive Manifesto Wall.

LDF exhibition and event-based cultural production has provided a dynamic socio-spatial territory for identity construction and self-reflexivity. The Design School's celebration of multiple contributions, creative interactions and ongoing cooperation has run in parallel with an acknowledgement of some absent voices and separations. As a participatory and open-ended means of cultivating a broad range of research opportunities, growing resources and expanding our understanding of what design can do in the world; it has been an invaluable experience. Our next LDF show for 2019 is EMERGENCE: Service/Social/Sustainable Design. It references emergence theory which describes the potential of individual parts of a system to work together to give rise to diverse and dramatic behaviours. The notion of EMERGENCE suggests something significant taking shape; a collective act of formation; a Design School in the process of continual becoming.

## References

O'Neill, P. & Wilson, M. (Eds.). 2015. *Curating Research*. London: Open Editions.

## About the Author

**Dr Nicky Ryan** is Dean of Design at London College of Communication, University of the Arts London. She has over twenty years' experience of teaching, leadership and management in Higher Education. Her undergraduate and postgraduate studies were in the History of Art and Architecture and her PhD thesis examined the relationship between museums and the market. Postdoctoral research has resulted in outputs which include book chapters, articles, reviews, and conference papers in relation to museums and curating, contemporary patronage, culture-led regeneration, spatial practices, design futures and art and design pedagogies. Email: n.ryan@lcc.arts.ac.uk