

# But Is This Still **Design**?

Considering Process and Format

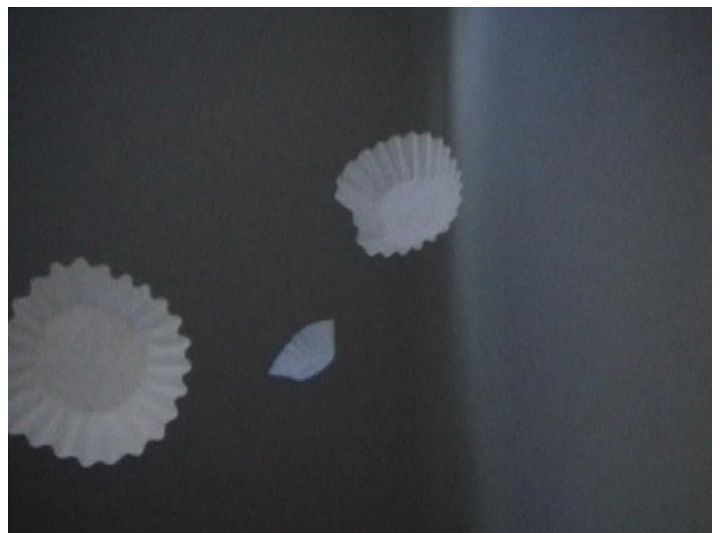
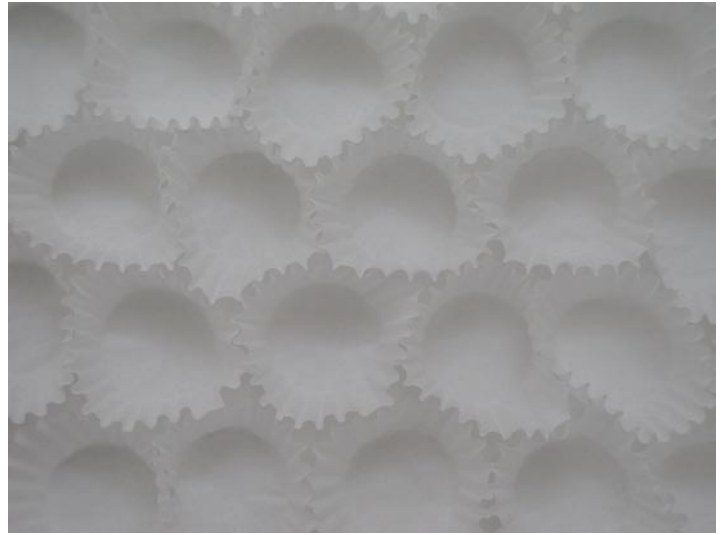
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In the graduate program in Design at California College of the Arts in San Francisco, many of the student projects do not look like “graphic design” in the traditional sense. Lucille Tenazas, the founding chair of the program, likes to say that the students are designing in ways that have never been seen before, anticipating what design could become and what roles designers may assume in the future. Many of today’s big topics in design are issues we consider — strategy, process, authorship, methodology and collaboration are all focuses of the program. But at the core is a constant question that I have to admit, has frustrated me, but it has also fundamentally changed the way I think being a designer: “Does the design process have to result in a design product?”

One of the main points is that the design process begins to define the designer more than the end product. My mom is working on her nursing degree, and the other day I was telling her that I would be doing a presentation about the design process, and she told me that she just learned about the nursing process. That left me feeling a little less original, but nonetheless, the design process is one of the tools that designers tout highly. Don’t we tell our students that great ideas don’t just pop into our heads on the first try (in fact that is where really bad ideas usually come from.) Great ideas are arrived at through a process.

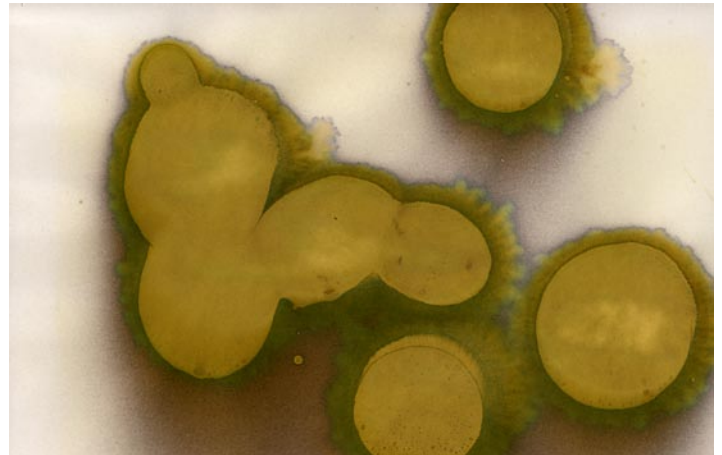
The Design Process is referred to constantly, the steps we goes through to generate ideas and forms. Research, information gathering, formal studies, interviews, Google, historical influences, experimentation, accidents, thinking, sketching, writing – no one goes through the same process, everyone finds the process that works best for themselves. I always encourage my students to pay close attention to their process and figure out what yields the best results for them.



Having an end product in mind limits the scope of this exploration (even if that is just a format -- a poster, for example). This is especially true for students. There are so many expectations and limitations that a format introduces to a project that it becomes a constant struggle to get students to think about new ways of approaching the project, redefining its goals or assessing its effectiveness. For example, a student would never consider shooting video if the project was to make a poster. But what might be gained from doing such an exercise? For that reason, at CCA we are rarely given parameters for what final form a project will take.

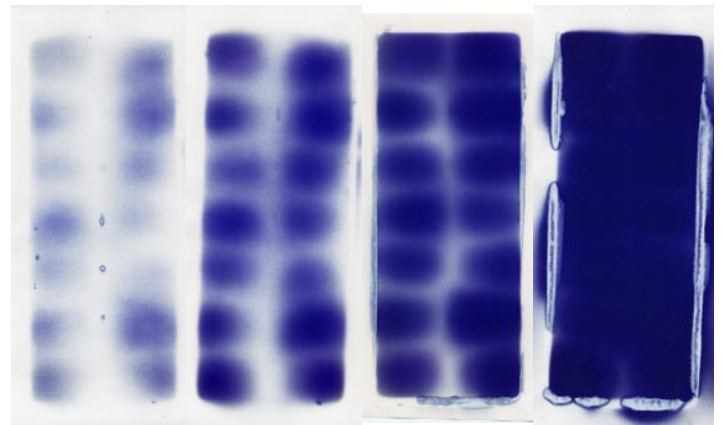


But one of the big questions this brings up is a very political one in our schools: If designers don't make posters and websites, how will we be able to tell them apart from the fine artists? This is a question we wrestle with quite a bit in the Design program. Is the work we are making art or design? And does it matter?

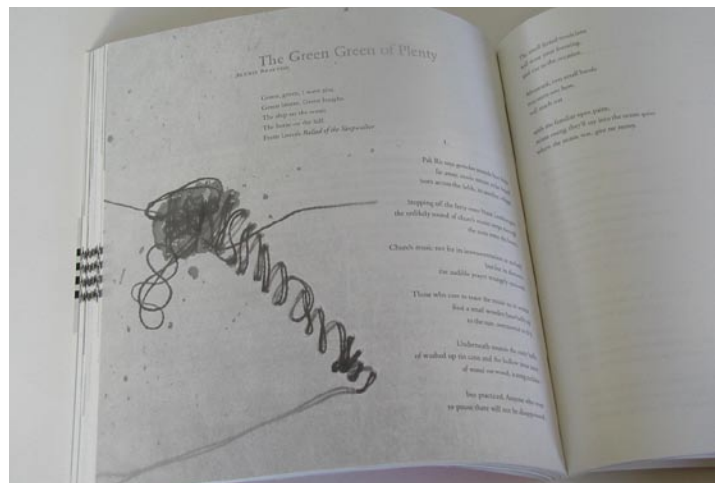


I am going to walk through a few projects where the format was left open and the resulting work benefitted from it. A couple examples:

- 1: A semester-long formal investigation of coffee filters
- Intended to de-program us as designers coming into the program and teach us to see the world all over again
  - without the expected leap to interpretation and meaning that we usually define as our role as designers
  - demonstrated the continuous possibilities of in-depth, rigorous, creative investigation
  - But was it design?



In an attempt to bring it down to earth, a classmate and I used these form studies as visual support for a literary journal. But was that a flat attempt to make it fit into the box of Graphic Design?





2: A study of a public park in San Francisco's Chinatown

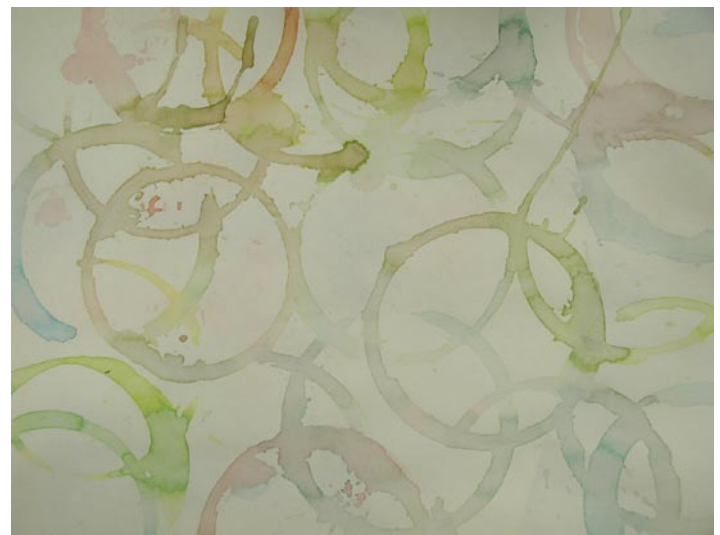
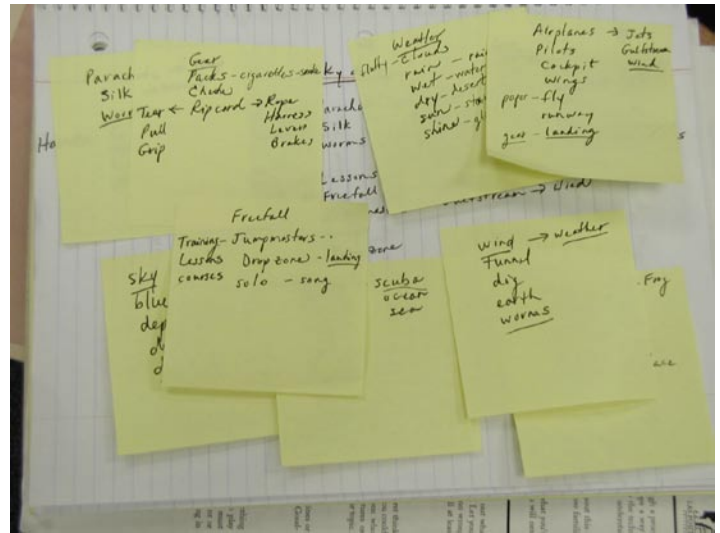
- working with a partner and we realized we felt like we didn't belong – not tourists, not locals
- assignment was to do an intervention in the site
- we realized that we could draw a crowd by doing rubbings of historical monuments, after doing more thinking, and after trial and error, we decided to play a game of checkers where the locals played games
- in the end, we played a game of checkers that drew a large crowd
- After that we came back to school and “did graphic design to it;” however, the actual game seemed to be the least contrived and the best expression of design
- But was it design?

After the fact we made diagrams and an installation about the event, but the event itself remained the most powerful part of the project.



3: A project I developed alongside these projects for community college students in an introductory design course

- students choose a topic and investigate it different ways, without knowing what they will do with the information they gather.
- brainstorming, research, hunting and gathering, visual / form studies
- in the end, I do give them a format -- a book cover -- but they only have a week to do it
- in going through this process, the ideas and results are much more advanced than typical projects similar students produced before.



As designers we are nearly always focused on what we will make: a poster, a book, a website. What happens when design isn't tied down by these limits, venturing outside of the expected "designed" result? We lock ourselves in by equating the act of designing we do with the things we make. This makes it harder in the end for design to redefine itself. By opening up the design process and its result to a wider variety of ends, we also open up the roles that designers today and in the future can take on. We won't be content with just making the Thing, but we will train designers to consider themselves qualified for roles like strategist, entrepreneur, author, collaborator, artist, and inventor, alongside maker.

I would like to close by quoting the artist Robert Irwin, who wrote this as he was leaving painting behind and trying to figure out what his art should be and do in the future.

**What kind of reality was this that demanded that the world end at the edge of my canvas? What kind of a world would it be if there were no such limits? What would this art be made of? Where would it exist? And how would we come to know it, let alone judge it?**