LIVD: An Avant - Garde Publication with Pedagogical and Epistemological Aims

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Abstract: Similar to modernist avant-garde publications like *"Bauhausbücher (Bauhaus Books)"* the contemporary publication "LIVD" incorporates theories and research that feed into and out of a (graphic / 2D) design discourse, linking these theories with practice and education. LIVD includes contributions from practitioners, students, and educators, seeking a balance with both epistemological and pedagogical aims.

This paper is respectfully being submitted in tandem with the publication itself. Issue 15.1 can be viewed here: http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/livd/1/ Together, they can be considered a non-traditional case study, of how an avant-garde journal can supplement the classroom experience, while also attempting to tackle serious questions of theory and research being asked by other design sub-disciplines, but surprisingly limited from graphic design.

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Keywords: LIVD, avant-garde publications; graphic design theory; extending the classroom experience

1. Introduction

"LIVD" was created in 2014, as a semi-annual design publication, originating from the Pacific Northwest. The publication includes contributions from students at undergraduate and graduate levels of study, professional artists, designers, and educators, with a key mandate of balancing their ideas against *lived experience.* The publication is topical, each edition focusing on a specific concept, used as a lens to discuss particular theoretical and applied themes that underpin a two-dimensional design discourse. Practitioner contributions range

in genre, from scholarly articles, to love letters, obituaries, interviews, and prose. Student contributions are written outside of the classroom, yet tangentially related to coursework maintained at Portland State University, affiliated via editor Meredith James (although, we would argue LIVD can easily be leveraged in similar fashion elsewhere). The goals of the publication are pedagogical and epistemological and will be expanded upon below.
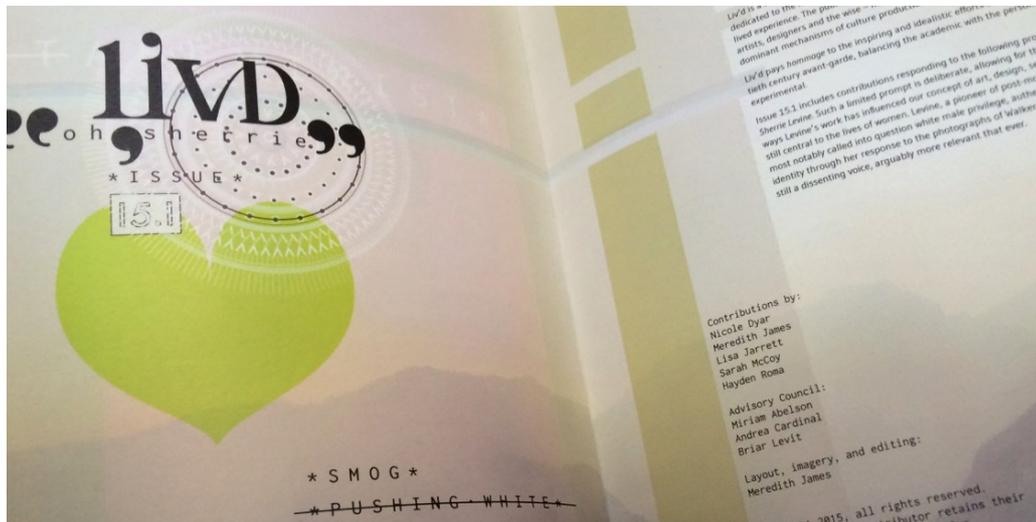

Image of LIVD Issue 15.1, © Meredith James

Two issues of LIVD have been created so far and two others are at various stages of development. The first issue of LIVD (15.1), "Oh, Sherrie" centers around Sherrie Levine, feminism, and appropriation; while the second edition (15.2) "Letting Go" focuses on failure. Appropriation and failure are dominant theoretical concepts within the design discipline, especially so within two-dimensional media.

These themes are discussed in greater detail within the publication itself, but as a cursory introduction to the *validity* of both, we offer the following examples. 1) Shephard Fairey's direct plagiarism of non-white, non-eurocentric revolutionary graphic design (Vallen, 2007) has become not just mainstream, but a multi-million dollar marketing ploy. 2) Appropriated labor and identity are being commodified by brands like Best Made Co., selling back a false masculinity: "sophisticated design is used as a means of staging privilege and aggression in refined terms" (Modrak, 2015). 3) Regarding failure, there is no part of a creative practice that doesn't involve failure on some level, from the multitude of ideas and concepts left behind in any given project, to the overt failure of obsolescence and waste-making in product design (Kolko, 2012), to widespread ballot layout inconsistencies (Lausen, 2007), to the social and economic consequences of failed structures, bridges, and spaces, like the Tacoma Narrows (WSDOT, n.d.), and Pruitt-Igoe (Freidrichs, 2011).

2. Historical Framework

The larger cultural contexts of our work and discipline are being pushed and pulled by digital technologies—along with larger mechanisms of information and connectivity (Morville, 2005)—as much as society's contexts were equally revolutionized through mechanization. Influence of the Industrial Revolution changed everything for western culture. As a parallel, we are in a similar state of disarray. On some levels, we comprehend the changes swarming around us, but on others, remain ignorant. The dust has not yet settled.

The foundations for LIVD were set a century ago through avant-garde publications affiliated with major artistic and design-based movements, and with specific design practitioner-educators grounded among them. Our current cultural and technological flux mirrors that of the early twentieth century, when mechanization and consequent modernism also radically transformed society. During the last period of significant change, avant-garde publications popped up like wellsprings, as a means of documenting and disseminating modernist concepts, anchors in the era's uncertainty. Some of the more notable include:

- Lef and Novyi Lef (Russian Constructivist)
- Ver Sacrum (Viennese Art Nouveau)
- Hobby Horse (UK, Arts + Crafts)
- Objet (Russian Constructivist)
- G: Material zur Elementaren Gestaltung (European)
- Merz (Dada)
- i10 (Amsterdam)
- Bauhausbooks (German Bauhaus)
- Die Jugend (German Jugendstil, Art Nouveau)
- AIZ (German, Anti-Nazi)
- Der Dada (Berlin)

What many of these publications have in common is the dismissing of traditional artforms for functional, applied, design-related ones; the strong link between creative practice and ideology ("fuse art and life together," Meggs, 2012); and the concept of creating a piece of work that is a total and complete example of the authors' theoretical-applied fusion (*Gesamtkunstwerk*). The writers, editors, and contributors of these publications were unfazed by the challenge of defining their discipline in an era of flux. And frequently vetted their own ideas through practice and education.

LIVD seeks to do the same, it is a design-centric publication existent within our current era of technological and social transformation, linked to the classroom. The publication itself is a *Gesamtkunstwerk,* from individual letterforms to entire articles, to graphic inclusions, everything within it has been designed. Contributors do not shy away from the difficult task of framing the discourse at an especially notable point in time, where design thinking itself is being appropriated as "the new liberal art" (Miller, 2015). And finally, the overarching mandate of balancing design with lived experience (hence the name "LIVD") grounds the

theories contained within the publication to a concrete, very real lived experience. Contributions like Jarrett's love letter to a friend who recently passed away and Kobra's call for a hug during moments of failure make this connection directly (Jarrett, 2015 and Kobra, 2016).
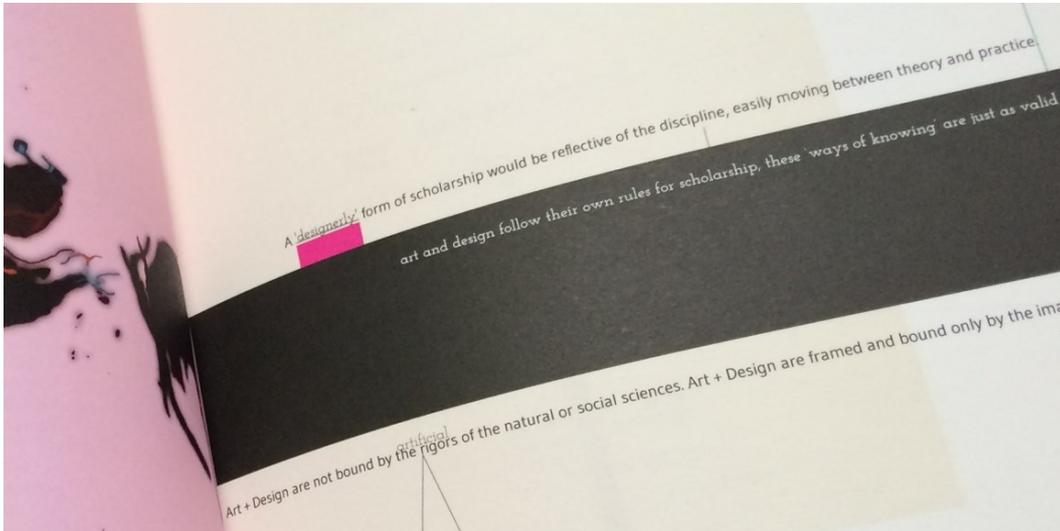
Detail Image of LIVD Issue 15.1, © Meredith James

3. LIVD as Pedagogical Extension and Epistemological Validation

The publication itself is a tool, used in conjunction with and as an extension upon the classroom with the following major aims:

- [epistemological] As a mechanism for professional designers and design educators in the United States (specifically within two-dimensional (2D) design) to critically reflect upon their practice and develop texts centering around the larger theoretical frameworks that support the design discipline.
- [epistemological] As a mechanism for furthering 2D design research.
- [ideological] As a format for challenging and defending various design-centric ideologies.
- [pedagogical] As a theoretical text itself to be used as supplemental material for the classroom.
- [pedagogical] Students author their own education through a reflective practice – student contributors create supplements to their own coursework.
- [pedagogical] To further student development by introducing professional-level opportunities for writing, research, criticism, and publication that exist independent of the classroom experience.

Critical Reflection

There is an interwoven exchange when those who practice are the same individuals as those who teach, write, and theorize. To define a discipline, to bear witness to its contemporary incarnation, is to participate in all these various modes holistically as they inform one another, counterbalance and challenge one another and if left off, leave a noticeable deficit in knowledge. Practitioners without reflection or critical inquiry are as unbalanced as academics who have never had to test out their theories. "This intrinsic polarity is responsible for the kind of schizophrenia every design school has experienced since the Bauhaus was founded, revealing itself in oppositions such as theory/practice, art/technology, and the like. Indeed, the discipline of design has to be considered as **paradoxical in essence, and any attempt to eliminate one pole to the benefit of the other inevitably distorts its fundamental nature**" (Findeli, 1990, emphasis mine).

Design encompasses all the various modes of theory and practice — educators, practitioners, critics, authors, experimenters, researchers, theorists — are all part of the discourse. Never was this more synthesized than in early modernism. There are networks of knowledge to be found among early modernists, networks that can be witnessed when tracing a particular school or even a particular publication or individual. Van Doesburg alone has direct connections with Schwitters, Moholy-Nagy, Lissitzky, Gropius, de Stijl, DaDa, Bauhaus, and *Art Concret.* The avant-garde journal *G*, for instance, edited by Hans Richter, includes contributions from Richter himself, Hausmann, Tzara, Schwitters, Malevich, and van der Rohe, among others (Mertins and Jennings, 2010). *Veshch* involves Lissitzky (Veshch, 1921-22), while *Lef* (1923-25) and *Noyvi Lef*, Rodchenko and Mayakovski (Novyi Lef, 1927-28). *The Hobby Horse* involves Mackmurdo, *Ver Sacrum:* Roller, Klimt, and Moser (Heller, 2003). *Bauhausbucher:* Kandinsky, Klee, Gropius, Mondrian, Moholy-Nagy, Van Doesburg (Meggs, 2012). If we add in overlaps of education, with examples such as Lissitzky and Malevich at People's Art School in Vitebsk, and Moholy-Nagy, Kandinsky, Albers, Klee, Gropius, Bayer at the Bauhaus, we see these knowledge networks solidify. Practitioners who are educators, who are also theorists, critics, and writers, have rightfully earned their posts as definers of the discipline. Their ideas crystalize via testing and validating across multiple domains. Informed by *both* theory and practice.

Furthering (2D) Design Research

Of all the design disciplines, 2D design carries a minority and misdirected voice regarding design research and theory, specifically regarding 'designerly ways of knowing' (Cross, 2006). LIVD offers a place for designers working in two-dimensional media to reflect upon, critique, and write about the various themes and areas of study within their own practice, *from an intrinsic base*.

Nicole Dyar's Article, "I Am A Reproduced Reproduction," © Nicole Dyar and Meredith James

For example, in LIVD edition 15.1, Nicole Dyar (graduate student) argues that social media appropriation has become the new female identity, an identity shaped by culture not by the individual. In edition 15.2, Nick Kuder (educator-practitioner) writes of stigmergic systems, and how they "make us vulnerable to self-amplifying patterns," specifically regarding design and interactive media. "…Services [like Facebook and Twitter] rely heavily on algorithms which use incestuous amplification; presenting information only from sources (e.g. friends) selected by the user. Shares, likes, and retweets are all forms of path amplification… and reinforce those signals which remain — encouraging confirmation bias." Kuder asks if this is ultimately a form of logic we should be propagating (2016).

In giving practitioner-educators and students a format for identifying these concepts, we are making the invisible visible. Works in two dimensional media have an intangible aspect that does in fact make it more difficult to track and document the larger theories that act as a base, but as Kuder points out, entirely necessary. Much of our social fabric is influenced by information, communication and concepts that 2D designers author every day.

Ideological Framework

"Aiming at 'the production of a new human being through art,' as Tret'iakov put it, *Lef* generated an original body of theory. At its core was the principle that artistic forms were themselves vehicles of ideology, and so the creation of a new society required the creation of new forms. Also central to *Lef* thought was the conviction that revolutionary art required the active participation of the viewer, who would be transformed by the effort of interpreting the work. Rodchenko's work of the 1920s – in design, photocollage, and photography — was a sustained effort to put these ideas into concrete practice." (MOMA, 1998).

As is pointed out in Rodchenko's work, the designed artifact can be the *embodiment* of the theoretical discourse. A single typeface (Romain du Roi) defined and epitomized the Enlightenment. The change towards a rational, mathematic, precise and gridded letterform embodied our collective reason, our structure, and our abandonment of mysticism. Many other examples can be similarly found. The artifact of a design thinking process (like the 'double diamond') signifies design's transition away from the object. Inclusive design is equally reflective of larger cultural demands to acknowledge more of us (CABE, 2008). Through our artifacts, through their tangibility, can we concretely see our own values and efforts reflected. This has always been the case: Cunieform (early writing and complex society), the Crystal Palace (Victorian stylistic mass-consumption by the petit-bourgeois), Ukiyo-e (Japonisme and the fetish), Art Deco dishwear (the Americanization of modernism, stripping content for style)… each and every one a reflection of the ideology of the discipline (and larger culture) at the time. For better or for worse.

Furthering Student Development Within the Classroom

The editor of the publication, Meredith James, is a design practitioner-educator, and brings the content of the publication into the classroom itself. Through a course titled "Design in Context: Failure," edition 15.2 extends conversations from within the classroom. The course "Design Research + Theory" is another natural fit. The editor also brings curriculum into LIVD. Coursework on research, on theory and that is topical in nature (feminism, appropriation, failure, aversion) are supported through the texts that exist within the publication itself. Additional applications can be found for courses from Graphic Design History (Sarah McCoy's article on early colonial women printers – often left out of the canon) to Design Thinking (James' use of design thinking to present a new perspective on the wicked problem of sex-based inequity, 2015).

Authoring One's Own Education & Professional-Level Student Work

Each issue of the publication is topical and different students at different levels of coursework are brought in as contributors, predominantly through their own initiative. Students identify themselves by voicing an interest in design writing, research, authorship, and distribution, knowing the publication differs from a traditional studio experience and are willing to commit to these activities outside and independent of the classroom, well beyond traditional channels of studio or crit. Students are given a format to write on a topic that is of interest to them – similar in structure to an independent study – and criteria for determining success of the finished contribution (whether written or visual) is heavily shaped by the student themselves and the motivating expectations of practitioner contributions, essentially being part of the journal's *community* (Tovey, 2015).

Design as a vocation (Bringhurst, 2009), expects us to take a longer, more considered and open-ended approach to the discipline. One that doesn't neatly fit within the confines of a university or curricular structure. A vocational, committed interest in design is shown by students willing to engage in the work on their own time, without course credit, sheerly for

the learning experience itself. Enhancing the student experience in such a way, affords students the ability to carve out autonomous pathways, a scholarship of design of their own, and a voice to help shape their own education and that of their peers (specifically when content they author is used as supplemental course content). *Students teaching students.*

With the journal, students are also engaged in a variety of other practitioner / real-world executions, from assistance with production of the publication, to real-world printing, distribution, social media and dissemination practices. The relationship between LIVD and all involved with it is fluid and dynamic, touching upon multiple aspects of the curriculum without being anchored to any of them. The publication is not a class, is not for a class, rather it is a venue for (2D) designers at all levels of practice to reflect and articulate concepts germane to our discipline.

4. Conclusion

To create design scholarship is to balance the theoretical with the applied, and never more so was this apparent than in the early twentieth-century avant-garde publications of European modernists. Key practitioner-educators defined the discipline through a fluid exchange of ideas within and beyond the classroom. LIVD, a contemporary avant-garde publication aims to do the same in a contemporary setting.

Please see the included link to edition 15.1 of LIVD, where contributions from authors Dyar, Jarrett, McCoy, Roma, and James discussed above can be seen in context: http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/livd/1/ Of note, is the democratic treatment of all involved. Students are given equal status to practitioners and educators. The publication is a community of exchange.

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