One of the great privileges of art school has been to watch karma in action.
To see the forces pulling and pushing me around, as I try to make work.

Design should capture the action of mind.
It will reflect either ignorance or awareness.
And likewise it will impart these qualities.
To design the thing, design yourself.

a design inqury into the performative

It is informative to consider jazz as a model for this way of thinking already existent and well developed in the world. In the case of jazz, the 'thing' is not only non-visual but ephemeral, meaning the substrate available to the artist is of necessity the collective experience, rather than any durable material. For this reason, jazz operates within the parameters of the 'field', the 'performative' (as opposed to the performance), and channels specifically the individual performer's personal (if perhaps transcendental) experience, in spontaneous enmeshment with the moment (in symbiosis with other performers and the audience, but also relationally with factors such as ambience, weather, locale, instrumentation, composition, and musical form.) Indeed, both jazz and blues music have their roots in the cultural backdrop of West Africa, as well as in ancient Celtic and Mongolian origins; they preserve the shamanic sense of reality as negotiable and provisional.

Introduction

The idea that 'things' can be thought of as the effects of perception and agency — an idea that has gained traction over the last several decades in multiple disciplines, from cognitive science, to quantum mechanics, to literary, semiotic, anthropological and philosophical perspectives — presents some fascinating questions and opportunities for graphic design.

There are many ramifications and offshoots from this central tenet. To exist, things must be negotiated by 'someone' with some cause to do so. This means that they are always inherently 'co-authored'; the old dichotomy of 'sender' and 'receiver' breaks down. In this paradigm, it is naïve (and politically passive) to think in terms of 'representation', as this is to assume and become servile to the existence of some axiomatic other 'thing', and to assume the transferability of this through the representation. So rather than representation and performance, enactment and performativity become key practices. (For this distinction between the performance and the performative I am indebted to John Langshaw Austin's 'Speech Act theory'; and within the arts, poet Charles Olson's sense of 'projective verse'.) What we might previously have thought of naïvely as 'objects' become recontextualized not as empirical fixities with inherent properties but rather as constellations of stimuli which activate relationally according to desire (Deleuze and Guattari). Hence the 'field' displaces the 'surface' as the area of the designer's attention. And the design of the thing can no longer be considered an innocent, naïve act: it must begin with a greater awareness of, and even designing of, the designer. Rob Giampietro's article 'School Days' builds on Mark McGurl's work to consider the way in which designers are produced from a pedagogical perspective, but attention to what might be termed the deeper genesis of 'things' could be further extended in both macro and micro directions — to the biological, as well as to the short-term embodied (sensory as well as cognitive and cultural) experiences of the designer. Thus 'things' implicitly entail the bringing into existence and modulation of reality; they are the transaction sites in what might be thought of as an economy of 'reality'. Such a worldview is common to many wisdom traditions, such as Sufism, Buddhism, Native American belief systems, animism, and other relational epistemologies, and is often cited as being a non-dualist, pre- (and post- ?) Cartesian perspective. It also is essentially what, in a western anthropological theoretical context, Bruno Latour describes as 'Actor Network theory'.

Addressing Latour, Martin Holbraad ('Can the Thing Speak?') argues that paradigms such as Actor Network theory tend to downplay or disregard qualities of materiality. It is certainly true that, stunned by the discovery of these complex 'meta-physics' that comprise the genesis of the thing, much of my thesis inquiry has focused less on the 'thing' itself as some kind of trite 'end-product'; rather, I have used these 'products' as experiments in a lengthy and detailed journey to explore and test the various theoretical discoveries I have made. As noted in the classic Chinese proverb: 'The journey is the reward'. This is not however to claim that form or materiality is unimportant: far from it, it is absolutely crucial, and a great delight to me personally as a designer. It is merely that I focused my attention on the wellspring from which form emerges. This thesis inquiry, and indeed all my extensive practical and theoretical work leading up to it, has substantiated an empowering platform and guided a way of seeing that is already vitalizing my design practice and will lead to continued profuse growth and discovery.