

Editorial

The Illustrator as Public Intellectual

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Can illustrators be public intellectuals? This was the question that motivated the 6th annual Illustration Research Symposium, *The Illustrator as Public Intellectual*, held in November 2015 at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). It is also the theme of this volume of *The Journal of Illustration*.

The term ‘public intellectual’ traditionally conjures up a primarily *verbal* role—an orator, critic, or writer who is concerned about things public, and who engages publicly with them. The mode is inherently rhetorical; the tone frequently polemic. As crafters in *visual* rhetoric, illustrators likewise engage publicly every time their imagery is released to myriad eyeballs *en masse*. But while illustrators and cartoonists influence the course of culture, and nobody could dispute that their work is ‘public’, they have rarely before been thought of as ‘intellectuals’.

One of the starting points for choosing the theme of public intellectual was critic Rick Poynor’s 2010 essay, ‘The Missing Critical History of Illustration’. ‘How seriously should we take illustration?’ Poynor asked. ‘I pose the question in this potentially offensive way because I often wonder how seriously illustration takes itself.’ Despite an ‘illustration renaissance’ during the 2000s, he continued, a critical framework and a decent historical survey were missing, and the recent flood of coffee table books were woefully lacking in even basic visual analysis, never mind theory, context, and criticism. Perhaps ‘illustrators aren’t sophisticated enough’ to want, let alone perform, such things, Poynor suggested.

Is it true? Are illustrators as a whole too unsophisticated to engage seriously with images and image-making? Poynor was invited to be the keynote speaker at the RISD Symposium to expand upon illustrators’ capacity to act publically and intellectually. He used his friend Russell Mills, the eminent illustrator of the punk era (who in recent years has worked with band Nine Inch Nails and collaborated in installations and soundworks) as an example of a self-directed creator whose technical and conceptual boundary-pushing has broken the barriers of what constitutes illustration.

This recent work by Mills is indicative of a general movement in which illustrators have started shifting their practices to increasingly autonomous and collaborative modes, and have turned to informing their work through academic lenses. We seem to be witnessing an ‘intellectual turn’ in the field. Alan Male (2016) recently made the case for the illustrator as polymath, and listed among potential applications, ‘advertising, retail, publishing, education and e-learning, documentaries and information design for TV, theatrical and digital broadcast, exhibitions and museum archives (both physical and digital)’. Borrowing from relational aesthetics, illustrators

are now finding they are not just picture makers, but engagers and intervenors, team players and social innovators – anything but mutes who sit sketching quietly in the background. We are going from people who *make* things to people who *do* things. Male writes,

A sea change – not only in the United Kingdom but worldwide – in higher education art and design has caused a research-based culture to manifest. In the past twenty years or so, those courses that were once overtly vocational and technique-led now have sharper emphases on contextual, critical and historical study. The integration of theory with practice has enabled many graduates to multitask, to be professionally independent and more intellectually ambitious... whose work is underpinned by an *intellectual engagement* with a subject [...] [T]he polymath principle is ownership – having a voice, expressing an opinion. (Male, 2016) [emphasis added]

Coincidentally, the world's political situation has taken on more urgency since the Symposium, and collaborative, relational work with its capacity for political impact is entirely timely. But then, illustrators always *are* timely – illustration is indivisible from communicating and being contingent on external criteria. You're always in conversation with a public, absorbing the zeitgeist.

This stands in contrast to the stock figure of the public intellectual who is placed at a remove, socially and economically, in order – we are told – to maintain disinterest and to gain insight. There's merit in aloofness: street artists and political cartoonists maintain productive outsider positions. Workaday illustrators too have historically stayed in the background, handing off commissions without much involvement in the client's greater agenda. The artwork goes out and does the illustrator's bidding. Graphic satire, wordless books, and the culturally-critical street art of Banksy indicate that yes, one can speak impactfully in only images; several papers at the Symposium contained examples of images shouting over words, in high and low media. Powerful images will always comprise an important, and dominant, register of the field.

But is sketching at arm's-length the only viable position for today's illustrator or intellectual to take? In the current climate is it advisable for illustrators to participate effectively in the debates of our times through just visual means? Places for critically-minded illustrators to be within, not outside of, the flow of cultural streams permits change from within. Since 2000, networks made possible by the web and new roles forced into being by the reduction of print culture have intensified illustrators' function as engineers of social spaces and identities. In a time of heightened political division and hate, it is a radical act to be part of a community, to *direct* community. Communities evolve values, and from values we derive political and economic goals and purposes. Moulding identity and forging connection in communities is what illustrators as public intellectuals, embedded as members of the societies they serve, ultimately do.

The Maker fairs, the small independent comic-cons, the studio open houses – these are important evergreen reminders that there are alternative community-based modes of production and consumption worth pursuing. For one, as electronic surveillance grows, analog

methods of samizdat production and dissemination perform an important task in the exercise and preservation of free speech. And the more radical shows – the queer zine fairs and anarchist book fairs for instance – as well as the massive conventions of illicit Japanese fan art (*dojinshi*) that act as channels for newcomer talent to enter the commercial manga industry (Pink, 2007) – foment subversive alternative narratives and critical disruptions of mainstream visual culture that seep up the food chain of the graphic industries. The recent successful Women Who Draw web site with its feminist and intersectional values guiding its democratic interface (<http://www.womenwhodraw.com/>) is an example of strength in community and shared intent forming an effective phalanx of visual and social intervention. Social rhizomes may birth public intellectuals who aren't cis white males, because round-table hubs bubble up outside the linear, hierarchical career ladders that have historically privileged said males.

With the shift in politics, illustrators' functions, and the accessibility of audio-visual media such as YouTube, aloof and embedded illustrators alike need verbal skills as well as visual. We have seen this most strongly in the surge of graphic novels over the last 25 years, where self-directed creators write as much as they draw. Yet, giving credence to Poynor's criticism, in the United States and elsewhere, illustration schools have historically neglected courses in theory and criticism. In some quarters thinking verbally is considered a distraction from (if not a destruction of) thinking visually. This position is carried on by not a few illustrators and educators who stand by the tradition of craftsmanship, intuition and tacit knowledge, which they feel might wither under the glare of critical scrutiny and verbalization.

Whether studio practice and enjoyment of pop culture can be paralyzed by overthinking is worth considering in a future article; certainly there is something vital in channeling the 'flow' of nonverbal creative engagement (Csikszentmihalyi 2014). But consider also that refusing the mantle of 'intellectual' has cheated practitioners from the choice to engage with their output and their subject matter in more scholarly ways that would ultimately enhance illustrators' creativity: cultural literacy, agency, and ethical reasoning. These three qualities are absolutely essential to the success of any polymathic, relational-aesthetic engagement that the illustrator may embark upon with marginalized communities or business partners. Verbal ability would also gain illustrators some traction in academia, important now that many technical training programmes are becoming degree-granting.

Critical illustrators and illustrators as critics can be productive not just for illustration but for all manifestations of art, craft and media. But we will only reach this potential if illustrators claim their verbal and intellectual skills to theorize their own work and that of others; to assert views that they, as visual communicators, uniquely own; and to engage *with* publics *in* public in words as well as pictures.

Months after the Symposium, Rick Poynor reported that the event had signalled to him that there is 'a concerted international effort to establish benchmarks for the academic study of the subject' underway (Poynor 2016). As part of that, this journal provides illustrators with the opportunity to address their subjects verbally as well as visually. The articles that follow are examples of illustrators themselves reflecting critically, theoretically, and politically on the

nature of their work and its impact on various publics. Not surprisingly, all of the articles save one involve the role of education.

In the opening articles, we look at three illustrators who reflect upon their own practices and social interventions. First, Duncan Ross describes the subversive, political and relational or 'dialogical' aspects of illustrations made by himself and others for the independent Northern Irish periodical *The Vacuum*, and the paper's role in the community there.

Then, Priyanka Jain compares artistic training and values in Germany and India, and reports that 'illustration' still connotes 'propaganda' in German contemporary art schools, where narrative arts are misunderstood and undervalued. She makes a case that the contemporary art world, being insensitive to regional aesthetics, begets cultural-imperialist results when it persuades artists in India to abandon art forms that reflect and serve local culture. In works that accompany her article she employs traditional Indian forms in a contemporary vein using saffron as a medium. An example is shown on this issue's front cover.

Next, İpek Onmuş presents her picturebook, *A Long Way*, and performs a semiotic analysis of the manner in which it handles the topic of the current migrant and refugee crisis in Anatolia. Co-authored by her instructor Ilgım Veryeri Alaca, this article is also a case study in incorporating theory in teaching illustration.

Christopher Darling, also an educator, then gives a case study of training a marginalized group – prisoners transitioning back to regular society – as illustrators in the planning and execution of a public art mural in the mid-West United States. This pilot project, as he describes, offered positive outcomes but had unique challenges as well.

The theme of illustrators and education continues in Desdemona McCannon's contribution on the visual representation and social suasion of the 'everyday' in English history primers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These demonstrate how women writers and illustrators democratized Britain's self-image and attempted to forge a more collective national identity by abandoning the former penchant in history books for glorifying great men, in favour of domestic narratives, re-enactment, and statistical approaches.

Next, we come to a speech given by D B. Dowd in September 2016 on the occasion of the D.B. Dowd Modern Graphic History Library at Washington University in St. Louis, USA, being named in his honor. This was in recognition of his public service in bringing historical illustration and illustrators' estate material into the collections there. In his speech Dowd recounts the customary exclusion of illustration from academic discourse, and then shows the cost of excluding it, in that erasing historical visual culture also means erasing the history of racial discrimination, compromising reconciliation today.

Finally, I offer my review of Molly Crabapple's memoir *Drawing Blood*. Crabapple's story epitomizes every aspect discussed above: the transition of illustrators from makers to doers, the failures of education to prepare youth for careers as illustrators in the new economy, the

status of illustration vis a vis contemporary art, the power of working from within collectives, how social media has changed the game, the way illustrators are working evermore relationally, and the enduring power of illustrators to be political. Crabapple's path is emblematic of illustrators who are now advancing by way of non-traditional avenues and by speaking out verbally as well as visually. She represents the *new* illustrator as public intellectual.

As Poynor indicated, a serious study of the field needs to own its history. The illustrator as public intellectual can be claimed here and there over the centuries: socialist William Morris, for instance, or Robert Weaver, whose archives are held at the D.B. Dowd Modern Graphic History Library. He produced gritty, raw illustrations that shifted the definition of illustration between 1950 and 1970; and as an educator he helped instigate the Illustration as Visual Essay MFA programme at New York's School of Visual Arts. Weaver was renowned for his artistic autonomy and his often caustic criticism of other illustrators:

Many illustrators of today are too little concerned with the actualities of their time. Too often they merely aid and abet the pre-sold illusion of the age. The illustrator who should be outside momentary surface illusions observing, is himself observed as part of the phenomenon by more serious students of the time. (Weaver in McIhlany 1959: 66)

Rather than merely reflecting the times, he continued, 'In an atomic era, [the illustrator] should be a reactor' (ibid.). A nuclear reactor is not a settling prospect – but let us take from his metaphor the concept of fission and fusion: the public-intellectual illustrator as catalyst, stimulating energy and change. The role is ours by inheritance and duty.

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