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# CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE!

by

JORDAN D. GUM

Under the Direction of Jason Snape, MFA & Xinran Hu, MFA

## ABSTRACT

*Choose Your Own Adventure!* is a concoctive reaction to burnout. Born of frustration, existential crises, and career exhaustion, this project pursues an understanding of where the roots of burnout take hold, in the context of the life and journey of the creative professional. From that base of knowledge, the work seeks to subvert the binding effects of burnout through an amalgam of the experiential and the tactile. Part design experiment, part performance art, part spontaneous conversation therapy, *Choose Your Own Adventure!* is comprised of evolving collaborative design exercises, as well as a reflective conversation space within the gallery. The goal is not to cure burnout, but rather to serve as a potential respite from the internal and external pressures that weigh on those who pursue a career as a professional creative.

INDEX WORDS: Burnout, Graphic design, Furniture design, Collaborative art, Polymathy

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE!

by

JORDAN D. GUM

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2022

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2022

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE!

by

JORDAN D. GUM

Committee Chair: Xinran Hu

Committee: Jeff Boortz

S. Dawn Haynie

Susan Richmond

Jason Snape

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Academic Assistance

College of the Arts

Georgia State University

May 2022

## **DEDICATION**

For Linda Lou. Thanks, Mom.

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Nimer Aleck, II: GSU's very own Felix The Cat, Nimer never failed to pull a technique, a tool, or an answer out of his bag of tricks. If he didn't have it stashed in his office, he'd bring it from home (or let you drive over and pick it up). If he didn't know the answer, he'd find it. Without his wealth of knowledge and experience, along with a wildly generous state-of-being, not even a fraction of the show would have been completed.

Andrew Elstner: The lightning to my Victor Frankenstein. When it came time to strike the electric spark that would ignite the flame of life inside of *The Nostalginator™ Fireside Mk. I*, I was pretty sure I could figure it out. However, with the clock ticking away on the countdown to opening day, I *knew* that I needed to enlist the aid of a trusted fellow gizmo and whirligig enthusiast.

Enter Elstner.

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## 1 FRAYED ROPES & SPENT MATCHES

I'm so tired  
 Sheep are counting me  
 No more struggle  
 No more energy

- Fugazi, "I'm So Tired"

Pursuing a creative career is risky. When you first decide to embark upon this course, it feels, at first, like setting sail with only the distant horizon as a destination. The possibilities stretch out before you with the thrilling expanse of the unexplored. Somewhere past the distance of your viewfinder, however, lie treacherous and turbulent waters that threaten to drown passion and sink joy beneath the murky, roiling brine.

A moment of crisis birthed this project. My career veered off-course into a hurricane of exhaustion and discontent in the summer of 2021. That maelstrom has a name: Burnout. I'd encountered feeling burnt-out before, but this time was different. This time it felt like the storm would finally overtake me and leave me sinking, ever downward, into the abyss. But that point on the map is a far stretch from where my trek began.

Comic books were my greatest love when I was growing up – the vibrant, saturated colors, the wild lunacy of the narratives, the characters' fantastic, hyper-exaggerated personas. Everything about these modern mythologies sucked me in from the first panel. Inheriting the gift of draftsmanship from my mother, I spent hours redrawing my favorite splash pages and covers. Through this, I received my first informal lessons in anatomy, perspective, composition, and narrative flow. Along with replicating the figurative illustrations, I did my best to reproduce the compelling dynamics of the mastheads from my favorite titles, as well as the sound effect graphics peppered in the layouts. Here, I was inadvertently learning about the basics of expressive typography and information hierarchy. This passionate adolescent escape evolved into a full-on career goal. I

was enthralled by visual art, so I set my sights on becoming a professional comic book illustrator. My mother, who worked in the Hoover Vacuum Cleaner factory for thirty years, had only one hand-wringing question: “Can you get health insurance doing that?”

My mother made a valid point: how could I turn this passion into a viable livelihood? At the age of 18, I was stumped. All I knew was that I wanted to make art for a living. Later, this idea would present its own special set of pitfalls. The notion that Art and Design are inherently separate pursuits is one that has plagued me for a very long time. In my adolescence, I was ignorant of this debate and most certainly couldn’t comprehend the emotional and psychological effects that could result from turning an inner calling into an external occupation. Again, I could only see being creative for a living as my goal. I’ll work through the implications and challenges of making this choice in greater detail later in this writing. For now, though, cut back to my senior year of high school when a recruiter from a Pennsylvania arts college paid my art class a visit. The topic of his presentation was graphic design

The only visual aid he brought was a promotional placard for a morning radio show that featured hokey caricatures of the hosts. I wasn’t very impressed, or even paying much attention, until he said two magic words: comic books. There was the elusive, intangible key that could unlock the portal of my career plan and set my poor mother’s nerves somewhat at ease. “Mother, I shall become... a *Graphic Designer*!” Plans firmly in place, I sailed away from the grey tundra of Canton, Ohio to the sweltering tropics of Atlanta, Georgia.

When I began my undergraduate graphic design studies and experienced the nuanced spectrum of the discipline’s true nature, I was instantly hooked. Each new principle and niche of the practice became a fresh, ferocious obsession. Motion design, for example, made my brain buzz and my eyes vibrate. Having been partially raised by movies and TV, the marriage of narrative, sonic rhythm, and the magical evolution of visual form was wildly intoxicating. Sharing DNA with



mechanical engineering, packaging and interactive design reminded me that I love to build things and experience them functioning in accordance with the flow of my schematics.

Every corner of the discipline excited me, and in my nearly twenty years as a graphic design professional, I've touched nearly all of them. In that time, I've worked for many different types of clients, from the entertainment industry to educational software companies. The projects have ranged from the prestigious and exciting to the tedious and mundane. At various intersections throughout my career, I have felt exhausted, unappreciated, unvalued, and creatively stagnant. My usual solution to these career woes was to seek out new employment, to flee the unhappy situation in which I currently found myself. Eventually, though, those same feelings of dissatisfaction and disillusionment always resurfaced.

By the end of Summer 2021, I reached a point of complete collapse. As with any physical illness, by the time visible signifiers were apparent, the virus of Burnout had been eating away at me for a while. In hindsight, I see now that my Burnout symptoms began over a year before I could name my ailment. Shortly before this career crisis, however, in the spring of 2020, the world shut down. COVID-19 caused the world to slam to a standstill. So, what did I do to cope? I decided to design and build a gazebo in my backyard—quite a strange idea for me, given my distaste for the heat, insects, and humidity of Georgia in the summertime.



Fig. 1 Jordan D. Gum. Gazebo digital design stages, April 2020.

When I placed the order for the lumber and materials, I couldn't identify the inner struggle that was driving my actions. I was acting on instinct, to purge my deep-seated psychic malaise. I was also bored stiff, stir crazy from quarantine, and just wanted to get out of the house. It wasn't until over a year later that I could articulate what the gazebo represented. As I gazed forlornly out my kitchen window every day for over a year, I eventually realized that the gazebo was a physical manifestation of my professional and emotional burnout.

Most of my career can't be measured by any physical means. I like to joke that I "push light and numbers around for money," but that's not far from the truth. Working mostly in broadcast media and interactive design, a massive portion of the work I produced was intangible and impermanent. With our user experience-centric culture constantly evolving, at a certain point the work that interactive designers produce disappears to be replaced by new iterations. Though broadcast and film media are more likely to be archived and retain some level of relevancy, streaming culture has loosed such an inexhaustible flood of content that even the most unique and compelling creative works are lost in the pixel-dense din. This arena is where most of my career has been spent, and my gazebo emerged as a reaction to that existential apex.

In addition to being a gathering space, my gazebo offers an escape from digital distraction, a space for solitary, silent reflection. As a project, it represents everything I've been missing in my career. Building the gazebo gave me the satisfaction of measurable effort with tangible results, produced through a tactile connection with work and material. Every movement I make with the tools, material, and hardware brings the immaterial idea closer and closer to corporeal completion. When finished, my labor will be permanently evidenced in the form of an object that could very well outlast its maker.

The summer before my final year of grad school I spent in a freelance *Groundhog Day*, working nearly nonstop on repetitive, unstimulating projects. My return to school in the fall was

extremely difficult; I couldn't muster the enthusiasm for my coursework that had come so easily just two short years previous. Over the next several months, with the guidance, collaboration, encouragement, and advice of my instructors and peers, a more positive direction took shape. My work on this thesis really began when my committee chair and colleague, Jason Snape, asked, simply, what I wanted to do with my final year's work. I told him that what I *didn't* want to do was sit in front of a computer, pushing light and numbers around, for another solid year. With a shrug and raised eyebrows, he said "OK, don't."

The title of my thesis, *Choose Your Own Adventure!* is based on the series of children's books, started by R.A. Montgomery in 1977, in which each story has multiple possible outcomes. At crucial points in each tale, the reader is presented with a choice. Depending on which option they choose, the flow of the narrative changes, sometimes for good, sometimes not. In the context of this writing and the accompanying exhibit, *Choose Your Own Adventure!* is about exploration, experimentation, and re/discovery of creative joy. Through my research and creative process, I'm both examining the roots of my own burnout and methods of alleviating it. Parallel to this, I'm also questioning what can be done at the foundational level in graphic design education to offset the innate qualities of the discipline (and profession) that pave the road to burnout.

## 2 WELL, HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Fading sensations  
 Can't feel your hand shaking  
 Gradual cessation of all relations  
 Joyless masturbation  
 This is your heart breaking

- GG King, "Joyless Masturbation"

Before tackling the minutiae of what leads to burnout among graphic designers, it's best to acknowledge that my experience is not a rare one, by any means. Burnout affects *everyone*—as was brought into especially sharp focus during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Any solid examination of burnout needs a stable foundation. Understanding my, and everyone else's, burnout requires an understanding of the condition itself.

Designers are essentially problem solvers. We examine the client's problem and use our creativity and our tools to craft solutions. There is a pervasive notion within the profession that art and graphic design are separate disciplines. This arbitrary divide is something I've wrestled with over and over, trying in vain to resolve. At times, I've even detected a subtle indignant sneer in assertions from both sides, declaring "Graphic Designs are *not* Artists." Austin Knight, a UX designer, writer, and podcaster, lays out the key points of divergence between the two in his essay titled, in fact, "Design Is Not Art."

In the article, Knight describes three points of divergence: intent (expression vs. use), catalytic elements (internal vs. external), and creativity's role (creativity for its own sake vs. creativity as problem-solving skill).<sup>1</sup> While I agree with many of his points, I still hang onto the idea that graphic design *is* art. It's just art with a different goal. Although Knight concedes that there exist gray areas where art and design mingle, his final defining point is that "ego has no place in design."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Austin Knight, "Design Is Not Art," *AustinKnight.com*, 2015, <https://austinknight.com/writing/design-is-not-art>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

I lament the loss of the artist in that sentiment. A good designer *should* put part of themselves into the work they're making. That personal connection to the work extends into a connection with the viewer or user for whom they're producing work.

I find his identification of certain key aspects of graphic design useful, however, in the context of my quest to find the roots of designer burnout. Most significant is the fact that design is created to serve and respond to external factors<sup>3</sup>-- clients, in the most immediate sense, and users/viewers/audiences more broadly and abstractly. The needs and desires of these outside agents are front of mind with designers in their regular daily practice; they are also base ingredients for burnout.

## 2.1 Dispelling The Illusion of The Lonely Sailor

In 2019, the World Health Organization recognized burnout as an “occupational phenomenon” in their 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases in May of 2019. WHO defines the core characteristics of Burn-out syndrome as:

resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional efficacy. Burn-out refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.<sup>4</sup>

Some people would argue against that last point and say that burnout is just as much (if not more of) a societal condition as an occupational syndrome, especially in our time of extreme health

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “Burn-out an ‘Occupational Phenomenon’: International Classification of Diseases,” May 28, 2019, <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>.

paranoia, political and social unrest, and good old fashioned existential dread. Jill Lepore, in her May 2021 article for *The New Yorker* (appropriately titled “It’s Just Too Much”), presents a comprehensive overview of the history of burnout. The term, appropriated from the lexicon of drug addicts by Herbert Freudenberger after visiting a free clinic in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, has been in use in psychological studies since the early 1970s.<sup>5</sup> Freudenberger’s work was later developed into a detailed method of assessment by Christina Maslach. It’s become such a ubiquitous term in our society’s current circumstance that Maslach recently revisited burnout in her *Harvard Business Review* article “How to Measure Burnout Accurately and Ethically,” co-written with Michael P. Leiter. The goal of the article is to clarify the correct application of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). Stemming from the clear uptick in burnout during the COVID pandemic, Maslach grew concerned that the MBI was being misused, at times unethically, leading to misguided understandings of the syndrome itself. A worrisome example of scenarios involving the misuse of the MBI is when it’s been used to “identify (sometimes publicly) people who are ‘diagnosed’ as burned out and who therefore need to be dealt with in some way.”<sup>6</sup>

In 2015, societal burnout was examined from a philosophical/sociological standpoint by Byung-Chul Han in his aptly named work *The Burnout Society*, which Lepore cites in her article. In his examination of the root causes of burnout in a society, Han likens the condition to an external biological infarction that has invaded the body of the populace. His theories, rooted in the works of Baudrillard and Foucault, see today’s society as having an excess of *positivity*.<sup>7</sup> Han’s use of this term doesn’t mean that everyone is in a good mood all the time, but rather that society has unlocked the shackles of prohibitive “discipline society”<sup>8</sup> to allow the ego to surge forward into the land of

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<sup>5</sup> Jill Lepore, “It’s Just Too Much,” *The New Yorker*, vol. 97, no. 13. May 24, 2021, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter, “How to Measure Burnout Accurately and Ethically,” *Harvard Business Review*, March 19, 2021, <https://hbr.org/2021/03/how-to-measure-burnout-accurately-and-ethically>.

<sup>7</sup> Byung-Chul Han and Erik Butler, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

unbridled achievement, never considering that any arbitrarily desired form of “success” might actually be unattainable. Rocketing ever upward, fueled by an indefatigable mindset of “You can do *anything!*” the ego burns out, leaving the vessel containing it exhausted and depressed<sup>9</sup>.

Han also links overstimulation to burnout. In the chapter “Profound Boredom,” Han connects burnout society with a decline in creativity, stating that “immersive reflection is being displaced by an entirely new form of attention: hyperattention.”<sup>10</sup> He asserts that our current society’s extreme intolerance of boredom constricts the space available for the kind of deep concentration new ideas need to germinate.

## 2.2 Steering Towards a Quixotic Horizon

Having clarified burnout to be primarily a societal affliction, not reserved for any certain sector of the populace, my point of reference is my own. If my goal is to solve, or at least alleviate burnout for myself (and possibly by extension my students), it’s incumbent upon me to pursue that goal as a professional creative.

The internet is awash in articles about burnout. Many of these contain “How to avoid...” somewhere in the title. Joel Waggener, whose article “The Real Dangers of Designer Burnout: A First-Hand Perspective” for *Impact Plus*, does a solid job of detailing the unique elements of the profession that lead to graphic designers burning out: lack of variety in work, overextension of what can be reasonably be accomplished, the “hustle mentality,”<sup>11</sup> or not having enough time to produce work of that meets personal standards because of the next looming deadline. To this list I would add the lack of exercise and potential sleep deprivation that are frequently comorbid with a heavy freelance workload in a field that already lends itself to a sedentary lifestyle.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>11</sup> Joel Waggener, “The Real Dangers of Designer Burnout: A First-Hand Perspective,” *Impact - Opinion*, October 3, 2019, <https://www.impactplus.com/blog/the-real-dangers-of-designer-burnout-a-first-person-perspective>.

Waggener also notes self-doubt as a predictor of burnout, which chafes against Austin Knight's assertion that a good designer should eradicate any personal attachment to work. Waggener speaks specifically about client dissatisfaction (that external factor). Try as we might to separate emotional attachment to the product of our craft, as Knight suggests, it's hard not to feel bruised when our efforts produce a negative reaction. Waggener aptly calls this experience the "gut punch."<sup>12</sup>

The reflexive nature and reactive requirements of the disciple also contribute to burnout for a design professional. Designers are beholden to the occupational requirement to "turn on" their creativity at will. Granted, our education and experience give us the skills to do this effectively, but it's wildly different than waiting for the moment of inspiration to strike before we create. This unique characteristic of graphic design practice dovetails into something else that sets it apart from "pure" art: the concept of Reward.

When a creative is producing works that are catalyzed from within themselves, though it may be in pursuit of external reward, there is an instantaneous satisfaction in the making itself. A designer, on the other hand, primarily makes for pay. Because the work is not their own, not driven by their own need to create and realize a personal vision, the central reward, financial compensation, is delayed. Many designers, however, work for themselves or freelance, which carries the all-too-common risk of clients failing to pay or delaying payment. Therefore, the professional designer also experiences the stressors of gaining, maintaining, and managing their workload. Anxiety is the work-for-hire individual's constant companion. It feels like an invisible gun is pointed at your head, daring you to even *imagine* taking a day off. Do you feel like you deserve a vacation?

Perhaps even more frustrating are the practical and technological factors in graphic design. Every designer falls prey to the tyranny of the progress bar and the Mac OS-based arch nemesis: the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



Spinning Beachball of Death (SBBOD). That iconic indicator of disrupted productivity is a paralytic force. Creativity is about flow and rhythm. When you're concentrating deeply and making headway on a project, gradually bringing into existence the vision in your head, a Zen-like state occurs. You can feel the solution taking form, see it coming to fruition in real time, and it's invigorating. Then, *boom!* Spinning Beachball of Death.

Semiotically, SBBOD is a highly effective piece of UI design. It's a universally-understood indicator that the computer is performing a hardware and/or software-intensive process and it's an inherent problem in the world of graphic design. As technology has evolved, data-processing power and software capabilities have increased. Designers push the limits of both in tandem pursuit of innovation and efficiency until the peak of the tool's ability is reached, and then promptly exceeded. That's when the Beachball morphs into a harbinger of doom. There's nothing one can do except sit patiently and wait for it to finish its work.

The worst aspect of the SBBOD is that it breaks the creative flow. Other disciplines have similar constraints (paint drying, clay baking, film developing, etc.), but graphic design is unique in that it's more likely to be victimized by the arbitrary failure of our means of production. If the SBBOD's appearance does result in catastrophic loss of work, there's little chance of salvaging it. You start back at wherever the last Save point was and hope you're able to recapture the creative flow you were in before tragedy struck.

As if all the previous woe and worry weren't bad enough, the field of graphic design has, in recent years, entered a state of manic cannibalism by ultra-commodifying the discipline through design-on-demand services. Companies and service aggregators like 99designs, Canva, and Fiverr didn't invent anything new: ready-to-use clipart and design templates have been around for decades.

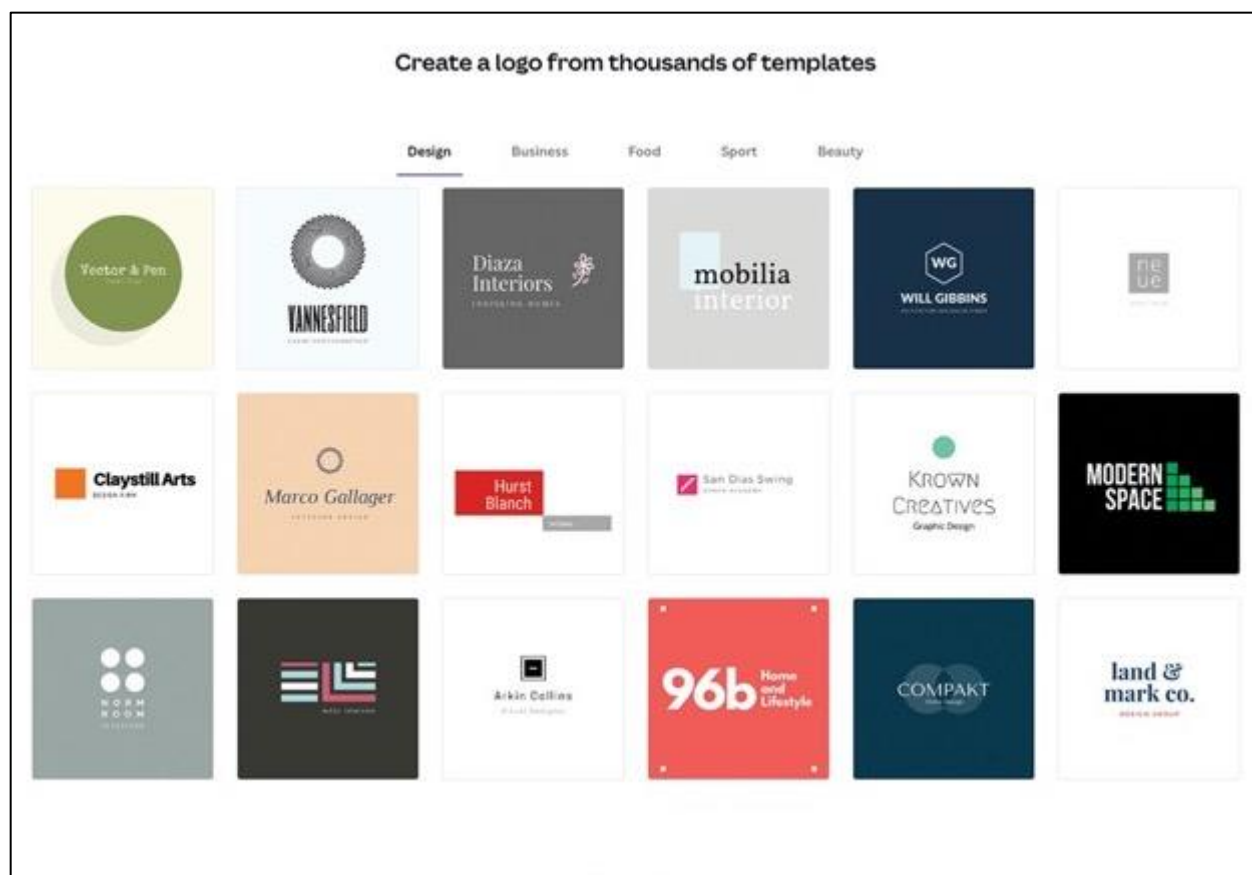


Fig. 2 Canva homepage showing the array of ready-made templates, © Canva

The pressure to meet tight deadlines and budgets called these products into existence long ago. What these new entities portend, if we're not careful, is the dissolution of artistry in graphic design altogether. By removing the Designer from Design, we slip further and further into the morass of banal visual homogeneity. Why hire an actual human designer when there's an algorithmically constructed HAL 9000 that can crank out all the branding and collateral you could ever need? Well, here's why:



Fig. 4 IWO, Inc logo comparison

The above logos are different versions of my own identity for my company, Imperial Werewolf Octopus, Inc. Two were made by online logo creators and one was made by me. Can you guess which is which? Does one's form, line, symmetry, color, and typographic styling seem to have been thoughtfully considered and carefully refined by a human mind? Does one option miss by a mile with *both* of the animals? Exactly. Here's a more practical example:



Fig. 5 800 Pound Gorilla Records logo comparison

On the left is one of the previous automated logo designs, revised to fit a former client's brand. On the right is the logo I designed for them. While the client could have, with a certain amount of fiddling and diddling, ended up with a fairly satisfying logo at a much lower cost, a robot logo-maker will never be able to replicate the conceptual process I employed to develop the design on the right. At least, I hope not.

Working under the demands of nonstop, always-connected capitalist society, often engaged in digital battle with the very implements that we use to make a living, professional burnout among graphic designers seems inevitable. However, not all hope is lost.

### **2.3 Lighthouses & Life Preservers**

Along with his diagnosis of the qualities specific to burnout in the design profession, Joel Waggener and others also offer up their perspectives on how to avoid (or at least offset) the condition. Many of these suggested remedies seem rather obvious and/or basic to 21<sup>st</sup> century societal standards, such as: maintain physical and mental health, get sufficient sleep, and cultivate work/life balance. None of these should be considered luxuries; however, in practice it's all too easy to let Work dominate Life.

Stefan Sagmeister, one of the most prolific and influential designers of his generation, developed a unique approach to avoiding burnout: every seven years, he closes his design agency and takes a one-year sabbatical. Experimentation and creative exploration are the sole focus of that year<sup>13</sup>. In his TED Talk, "The Power of Time Off," Sagmeister recounts how he decided to "borrow" five years from the theoretical timespan of the average career. Fueled by a waning lack of fulfillment and increasing redundancy in the conceptual nature of his designs, he took his first sabbatical in 1999. That initial attempt didn't go well; it needed structure. With a new plan in place,

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<sup>13</sup> Stefan Sagmeister, "The Power of Time Off," *TEDGlobal*, July 2009, [https://www.ted.com/talks/stefan\\_sagmeister\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_time\\_off](https://www.ted.com/talks/stefan_sagmeister_the_power_of_time_off).

Sagmeister saw the benefit returned exponentially when he returned to work. Experimentation in furniture design led to his later work moving more in the direction of human/object-centric projects, as well as forays into conceptual environmental undertakings.

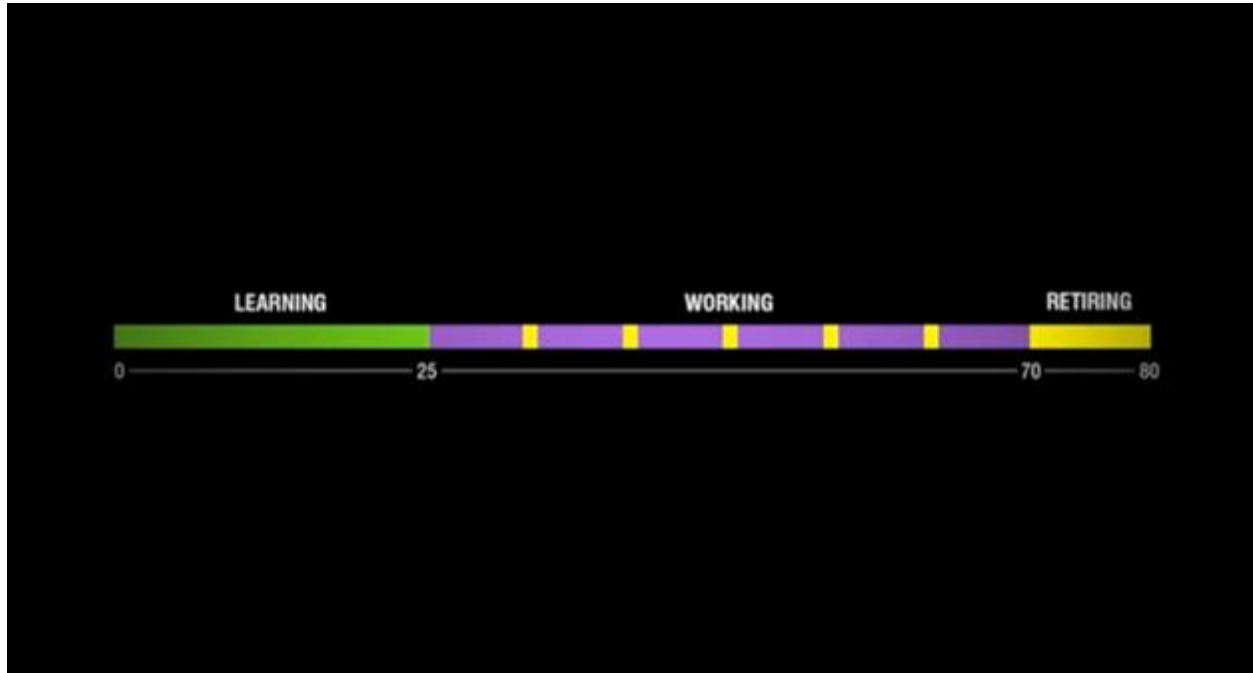


Fig. 3 Sagmeister's adjusted timeline of life from *The Power of Time Off*, July, 2009, © TED Conferences, LLC

When Stefan Sagmeister began taking these breaks from his career, he was one of the most lauded and successful graphic designers working, and still is. Not every designer will achieve the same level of notoriety and success, so how, then, can the strategy of taking time for creative exploration be introduced into the life of a “Regular Joe” designer? Better still, what can we do to fortify the professional creative before burnout sets in? The following section will examine foundational graphic design education to seek answers.

### 3 EDUCATIONS & EXPECTATIONS

Panic, silver lining, writing's on the wall  
 Children get together, you can save us all  
 Future's on the corner, throwing us a die  
 Slow down, turn around, everything's fine

- Black Sabbath, "Never Say Die"

Developing alternatives in graphic design education to shield students from burnout is a tricky business. The NASAD accreditation system to which many arts institutions are beholden comes with lengthy and firm guidelines for the discipline that dictate much of the practice-based curriculum. The Essential Competencies, Experiences, and Opportunities section for Sculpture, for example, takes up about half a page, whereas the same content for Graphic Design (labeled as Communication Design) takes up two entire pages. This degree of specificity can be traced to the American Institute of Graphic Arts' (AIGA) work with NASAD in the early 2000s to revise and extend the degree curriculum.

Prior to ruminating about what the structure of a graphic design education *could* be, we should describe its current state. Although my own experience, both as student and instructor, is just one voice, there are dozens of schools and academies with respected graphic design programs worldwide. I'll examine some examples of these in the second section of this chapter. But first, how did we get here?

#### 3.1 What It Is

In the foundation projects I completed in undergrad, the emphasis was on practical application. The creation of brand identities, product packaging, and promotional materials were all standard content in the curriculum. It became clear early on that graphic design was not a discipline of personal expression, but rather one of crafting successful solutions that fulfilled a specific need or purpose. The subject areas and courses fell into well-trodden categories: Branding & Identity,

Promotion & Advertising, Packaging, and, later, “Multimedia” (late 90s/early 00s). Each of these could theoretically become a focus for the budding young creative or they could dabble in all of them. The expectation instilled in us prior to graduation was: develop a skillset, craft a meticulous portfolio packed with examples of professional-quality work, and you’ll land a secure, lucrative career.

My experience as an instructor is still very new. The courses I’ve taught thus far have fallen firmly within the realm of professional preparation, not too dissimilar from my own educational experience described above. The core expectations haven’t changed, either, and this fact bothers me. My students’ primary goal: to be employable. That’s it. I hope we can aim a bit higher than that.

### 3.2 What It Could Be

Steven Heller and Lita Talarico’s book *Design School Confidential* presents a broad and compelling spectrum of work from every hemisphere, some utilitarian in its focus and some that seeks out wider horizons. Several of the more notable examples display what I think needs to be injected, systemically, back into graphic design education. The “Collage Poster Workshop” example, with its emphasis on play, experimentation, and tactile engagement, piqued my interest. The stated goal “to encounter form and content as malleable ... to experience the give-and-take of a fluid design process,”<sup>14</sup> is a fantastic way of teaching students to *get off the computer*. An instructor recently delivered similar advice to me and following that advice resulted in a much more engaging and rewarding project experience.

The “Make a Chair” project was another interesting example included in *Design School Confidential*. The extra dimension in this project, submitted by Atlanta’s Portfolio Center, required students to create a chair that drew inspiration from personal experience as well as a randomly-

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<sup>14</sup> Steven Heller and Lita Talarico, *Design School Confidential: Extraordinary Class Projects From International Design Schools* (Beverly, MA: Rockport Publishers, 2009), 134.

chosen point in art history.<sup>15</sup> As an instructor who has forced students to literally pull their subjects out of a hat, I heartily endorse challenging students with the unknown. The project parameters also stipulated that the students had to collaborate closely with the craftspeople who would be building their chair designs. This requirement not only helped students engage in a hands-on act of creation, it also helped them learn the value of working with others.

I also take as pedagogical inspiration the Marvel Comics anthology series *What If...?*. The series' premise is taking the established backgrounds of random characters and altering them slightly to produce an entirely new and unique history without affecting the established narrative continuity. For example: "What if Aunt May Had Been Bitten by *That* Radioactive Spider?"<sup>16</sup> The *What If...?* stories are among the most creative and compelling that the House of Ideas ever published because they are pure, unadulterated experimentation. The artists and writers had free rein to write the wackiest ideas they could think of and see what happened. It was a sandbox for consequence-free play and experimentation.

There are models for this type of education, of course, both past and present (and future?). When Josef Albers emigrated to the United States in 1933, it was to establish the art department at Black Mountain College (BMC) in North Carolina. Bringing his pedagogical experience from the Bauhaus to the US, he created more than an arts training program. Detailed in Frederick A. Horowitz's essay "What Josef Albers Taught at Black Mountain College, and What Black Mountain College Taught Albers," he constructed an arts experience that was open to all.

Albers' time at BMC evolved his instructional goals "from teaching professional skills to teaching the whole person."<sup>17</sup> He adopted the viewpoint that by including visual training into the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>16</sup> Jade Stewart, "The Wildest 'What If...?' Stories," *Marvel.com - Comics*, August 10, 2021, <https://www.marvel.com/articles/comics/wildest-what-if-comics-stories>.

<sup>17</sup> Frederick A. Horowitz, "What Josef Albers Taught at Black Mountain College, and What Black Mountain College Taught Albers," *Blackmountainstudiesjournal.org*, March, 2011, <http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/volume1/1-9-frederick-a-horowitz/>.



general curriculum, the life of any single person could forever be enriched<sup>18</sup>. To accomplish this within the school's miniscule budget, Albers improvised and used his surroundings to his advantage. A prime example were his *matière* projects. In these exercises, students were to take found and discarded materials, remove them from their original context, and craft a new meaning for them through composition and merging with other objects. Students gained the ability to observe and reimagine their own physical surroundings. The “success” of the project wasn't the final object, but rather the process of exploring and broadening students' awareness of their environment<sup>19</sup>. This element of creative exploration is missing from current graphic design classrooms.

A modern incarnation of what Albers birthed at BMC is the Dirty Art Department at the Sandberg Instituut in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Founded in 2011 and focused on true cross-disciplinary exploration, the DAD master's program sets for itself the goal of recontextualizing practice apart from medium and subject in order to “give an insight of how to place that practice into the different existing contexts of art, design, performance, writing, pizza making etc.”<sup>20</sup> Wildly accepting of “dangerous attempts and spectacular failures,”<sup>21</sup> the Dirty Art Department roots itself firmly in the theoretical and philosophical possibilities that arise from exploration and experimentation.

Ranging from the tactile, the experiential, the temporary and the permanent, the pilgrimage and the philanthropic venture, the curriculum in the Dirty Art Department dismantles the boundaries between “the pure and the applied”<sup>22</sup> in search of a new kind of reality—a far cry from the career-focused, practice-based curriculum widely practiced in graphic design education.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Helen Anne Molesworth and Ruth Erickson, *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933-1957* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 86.

<sup>20</sup> Jerszy Seymour, “Dirty Art Department - Course Overview,” *Sandberg.nl*, <https://sandberg.nl/main-department-dirty-art-department>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

A final example of what a different approach to graphic design education could look like is David Reinfurt's *A \*New\* Program for Graphic Design*. Reinfurt, who founded the graphic design program in Princeton University's Program of The Visual Arts in 2010, "wrote" his text by delivering the curriculum of three semester-long courses as a series of six 45-minute lectures, given over three days in 2018. The resulting text is highly innovative in its approach. Deceptively dense due to the sheer volume of history, theory, context, and practical application jammed into its compact 255-page frame, *A \*New\* Program for Graphic Design* at its core teaches the essential fundamentals of design in an engaging and reinvigorating manner.

The series of projects that perhaps best captures Reinfurt's core idea are components of Assignment 1: *Stop* and *Go*. "Stop!" and "Go!" as verbal directives, are easy to decipher and comprehend. As semiotic entities, however, they're not so easy to dismantle and reimagine. The cosmic enormity of this task is what Reinfurt lays on his students when he assigns the eponymous projects. The twist is that *Go* is assigned a week into working on *Stop* and the class is directed to make the two interdependent.

To summarize: *Stop* is a four-week long project, the objective of which is to design a new symbol that can universally be recognized to mean "stop." The brief states that it must not "rely on established symbolic conventions like an octagon or raised hand, graphic conventions such as a slash or an X, or literal conventions such as the word 'stop.'"<sup>23</sup> Students spend the first three weeks working tactilely, producing sketches on letter-sized paper. Starting in Week 2, Assignment 1 is amended to include *Go*.

With the inclusion of *Go*, the parameters of the amended project now include the concept of visual syntax, described as how "Two or more graphics can work together ... to mean something

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<sup>23</sup> David Reinfurt, *A \*New\* Program for Graphic Design* (Los Angeles: Inventory Press, 2019), 117.

that neither means on its own.”<sup>24</sup> The now-broadened goal of the assignment is to craft a symbiotic semiotic relationship between two symbols that “convey their relationship to each other immediately, intuitively, and visually to produce a very limited graphic language.”<sup>25</sup> The two new symbols, in the end, should be “directly related to, and dependent on”<sup>26</sup> each other. The final twist: Reinfurt states at the end of the brief for *Stop* that for the student to craft a successful design, “it may be necessary to cheat, strategically ignoring some of the embedded restrictions.”<sup>27</sup>

Though all the preceding examples certainly led to formative pragmatic experience within graphic design, I see this outcome as secondary. The essential takeaway in all these examples is the encouraging of experimentation; the fostering of curiosity and engagement with the unknown. The most fruitful educational experiences I’ve had, both in undergraduate and graduate work, have happened when I applied foundational design concepts to projects that fell outside a familiar graphic design scenario. Cross-pollination, turning the canvas 90° to alter perspective, and taking blind leaps into mystery all breed the exuberance of the unexpected.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 117.

## 4 REJUVENATION, REINVENTION, & REDIRECTION

Deal me up another future  
From some brand-new deck of cards

- Bob Seger & The Silver Bullet Band, "Till It Shines"

At this point, the details of what causes burnout, both in the context of the creative professional and within their formative experiences, have been established. The problems in both areas are vast. This section will detail the three main aspects of my recent experience that have the most potential for stemming the tide of creative and career burnout, if not necessarily eradicating it. Unsurprisingly, two of the three are centered firmly within the academic sphere of existence.

### 4.1 Rejuvenation: Teaching & Mentorship

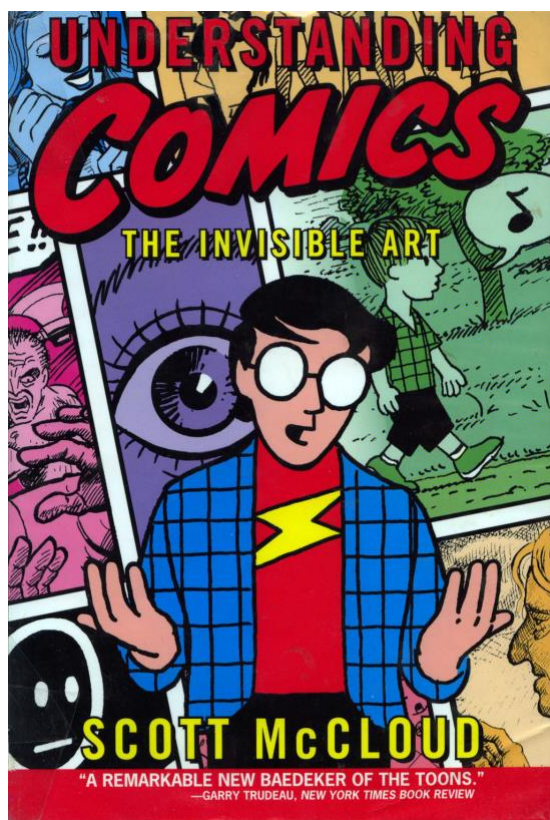


Fig. 4 *Understanding Comics*, © Scott McCloud

One day, while meeting a professor in her office during my undergrad studies, I noticed a copy of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* on her bookshelf. I expressed my excitement at this personal full-circle moment. She, in turn, gave me the academic definition for all those disparate, magical elements that made me fall in love with comics in the first place: Semiotics.

Returning to McCloud's first volume on "The Invisible Art" during the course of my research, I see it now as a viable philosophical text for an introductory design course. Though his primary focus is to illuminate and elevate comics for

the lay person, McCloud articulates techniques and concepts which we, as design instructors, strive to instill in our students.

Over the course of his exhaustively researched history of sequential art, McCloud touches repeatedly on core design principles and presents them in a clear, accessible, and meaningful way, with a friendly-yet-authoritative voice. For example, the images below come from his chapter on icons, where he deftly illustrates how the human mind, through the magic of semiotics, can come to see itself mirrored in the simple combination of two lines and two dots.

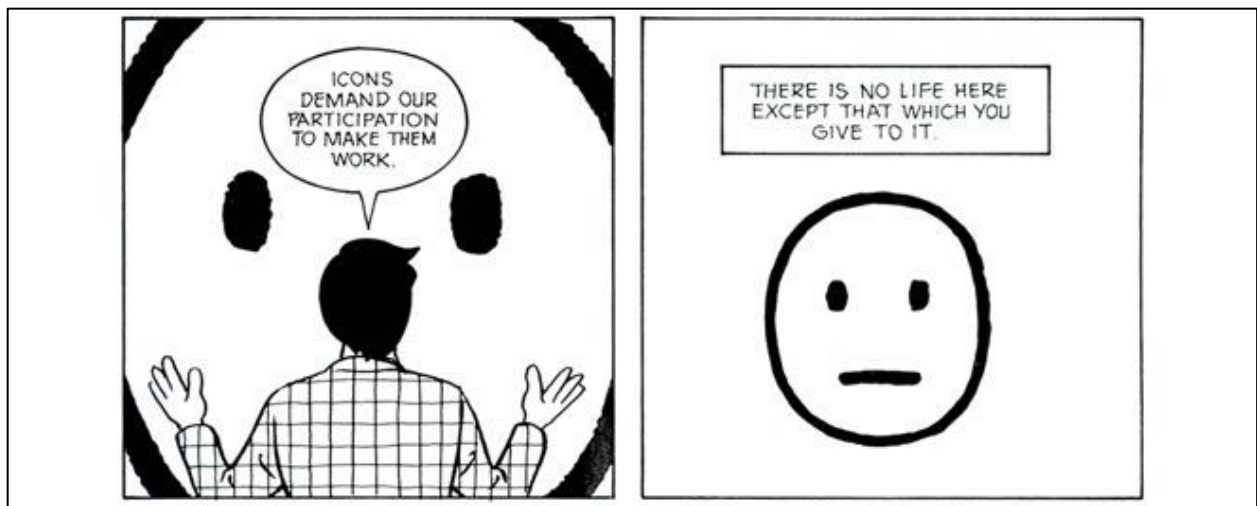


Fig. 5 *Understanding Comics*, p59, panels 1-2, © Scott McCloud

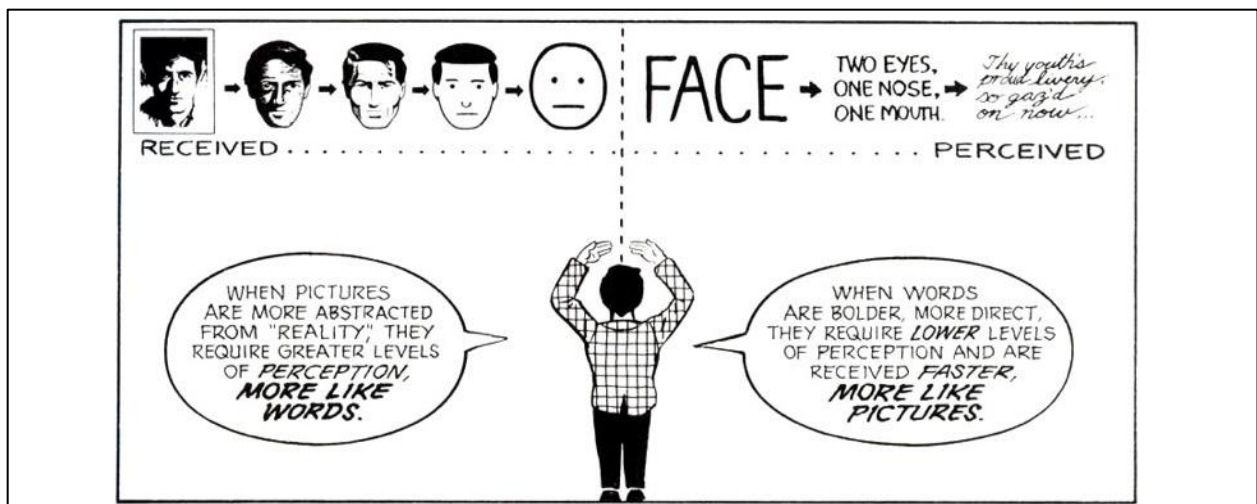


Fig. 6 *Understanding Comics*, p49, panel 3, © Scott McCloud

Years later, that now-former professor was the catalyst in my career shift from professional designer to professional design *teacher*. On February 9th, 2017, at 9:33am, I received a message from Liz Throop. My alma mater had a problem, and I represented a solution.

The conversation went like this:



Fig. 7 Facebook chat with Liz Throop. Feb. 2017

An adjunct instructor had left unexpectedly, and the school had an immediate need for an instructor who could teach two sections of a Motion Design course (my favorite corner of the Designiverse, remember!)—or the classes would have to be canceled. At that time, I had been back to full-time freelancing for eight months, so my schedule was more flexible than it had been in a while. I thought, why not try something brand new?

What I didn't expect, and what continues to stoke my interest in teaching, is the excitement of working with young designers as they struggle and stumble and eventually steer their fresh minds to a point of design success. Guiding students as they explore new concepts and perspectives and

watching them flash a little bit when they finally “get it” is non-stop entertainment. It’s better than TV. Sometimes I wish I’d started teaching sooner, but I’m not sure I was the right person before that specific point in my life. I suppose that’s how serendipity works.

I’d had opportunities to act as a mentor in my career before, but those were always in the context of my occupation. At Adult Swim, I had interns from Georgia State and other Atlanta-area schools. When I was the creative director at a small Atlanta agency, I had a team of young designers working under me. Looking back, I can see where the seeds for my present pursuit were sown in those interactions with young designers just beginning to hone their craft. Helping them refine their work and realize a more satisfying solution is a kind of high you can’t buy on the street. In teaching, I also found a rekindling of my old passion for design which had started to wane a bit. I found myself solving the problems I set before my students in my own way, in my head, and enjoying the surprise when they would deliver something completely different and often times better!

There quickly came a point, though, when balancing full-time freelancing and teaching became too much for me to juggle. A decision needed to be made, a new path chosen. I chose to return to academia and pursue my MFA, the culmination of which this thesis represents. Matriculating in the Fall of 2019, I found myself on a fresh stretch of highway and vibrating with anticipation at the weird trip that lay ahead. My brief time spent at the front of the classroom had reinvigorated my excitement for graphic design, as well as a desire to engage with it in a scholastic setting. Subconsciously, what I was really after, however, was something else, and right out of the gate, I got what I wanted: Challenge.

## **4.2 Reinvention: Back to School, Rodney**

The opportunities for experimentation and exploration outside of my discipline afforded me by coming back to school, after nearly two decades in the professional world, have been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. From the intellectual challenge of analyzing and discussing

an art movement like Afrofuturism to the opportunity to disappear into a rabbit hole of Soviet-era bus stop designs in a Placemaking course, the chances I've had to dig into subjects wholly outside my wheelhouse have been numerous and varied. Even when my role in studio projects leaned heavily on old familiar areas of graphic design, I found excitement and joy in collaborating with peers from other creative areas. Beyond the intellectual challenges the work presented, these interactions were the reward. Overall, my return to education has been an enriching and reinvigorating experience.

All these opportunities are part and parcel of the insular experience of being a design student. In the professional world, Life tends to hijack any attempt at living a well-rounded, polymathic, creative existence. There are plentiful examples of people who have managed to pursue their passions while maintaining the basic necessities of income and employment, but the means by which they accomplish this feat are opaque to me. How do they do it? How do they manage to stay creatively fulfilled when faced with the torrent of obligation and responsibility that comes with being a member of a global capitalist society?

### **4.3 Redirection: Polymathy & Beyond**

When I was in high school, we had two different tracks that you could pursue as a student: Vocational Technology and College Prep. The curriculum in "VoTech" was geared toward preparing students who would be entering the workforce straight out of high school. Areas like Auto Shop and Horticulture were some of the offerings.

I'm not sure exactly why or when the decision was made, but I was always on the College Prep route. It seemed like a foregone conclusion that I would graduate high school and go straight into the university-level phase of my education. Looking back, I think I would have enjoyed taking a course in automobile maintenance or learning how to properly tend a garden



When I finally did learn how to change my own oil, there was a liberation found in that knowledge and attainment of a self-sufficiency skill. Kids on both sides of that scholastic border missed out on potentially discovering a new passion or talent.

“Vocation” and “occupation” are words that have until recently been synonymous in my mind. The term “vocation,” based on its root in the Latin verb *vocere* or “call,” actually connotes something more than just a job; a vocation is a calling, a passion. I would call design my *vocation*, though it has also been my primary *occupation*. Can a person’s vocation change and evolve? Can a person have more than one vocation?

The common strategy running through many of the experiences and remedies described in this thesis has been reframing one’s own existence to engage with the myriad possibilities that may arise; in other words, leading a polymathic life. Polymathy is the pursuit of various, disparate interests. It was the active mindset I maintained throughout the making of the pieces that comprise the creative result of this thesis.

Throughout recorded intellectual history, the most revered thinkers have very often been polymaths. Think: Leonardo da Vinci and Benjamin Franklin. Both men dipped and dabbled in as many different arenas of human pursuit as possible. Da Vinci was a painter who invented a helicopter. Franklin was a typesetter who became a statesman and diplomat who also invented the lightning rod and bifocal eyeglasses. In his book *The Polymath*, Waqās Ahmed moves past these two common examples of polymathy and details the lives of an entire pantheon of great polymaths who throughout history have lived in and shaped our world. Sadly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the existence of polymaths has dwindled.

Ahmed contends that polymathy, once a standard part of human existence, has systematically been bred out of our voracious neoliberal globalist society in favor of specialization. Specialization is a key element in furthering the global capitalist economy, where workers’ personal

fulfillment is subordinate to their ability to contribute labor and increase wealth. Ahmed asserts the possibility of reconditioning of our individual perspective; he exhorts us to “detoxify our own minds”<sup>28</sup> as a possible strategy to combat the current paradigm. His program has six phases, starting with “Individuality – Understanding oneself”<sup>29</sup> and ending with “Unity – Unifying various strands of knowledge for greater clarity and vision of the whole.”<sup>30</sup> Nestled between these two are the essential concepts that guided my practice as I evolved *Choose Your Own Adventure!* from a frenetic, desperate, burnt-out panic into the concoctive experimental conceptual life raft it became. These concepts are Curiosity and Creativity.

Ken Robinson, the education writer cited by Ahmed, states that “Imagination is the ability to bring to mind things that are not present to our senses. Creativity is putting your imagination to work.”<sup>31</sup> If Curiosity is “continuous, boundless enquiry,”<sup>32</sup> as Ahmed posits, then Imagination must be the hypothetical mental mechanism that seeks to answer those enquiries. Why ask questions if you don’t want answers? I’ve asked a lot of questions over the course of this writing:

- What does a creative professional do when they’re tired of professionally creating?
- How can the seemingly inevitable condition of burnout be sidestepped?
- Can it be avoided before we even come close to suffering from it?

Through the work outlined in the next section, I lay out my initial experiments into finding answers to these questions.

By conducting these experiments, which helped me sustain and grow my curiosity and imagination over the final year of my graduate studies, I’m happy to report that my own personal

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<sup>28</sup> Waqas Ahmed, *The Polymath: Unlocking the Power of Human Versatility* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), 115.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>31</sup> Ken Robinson, *Out of Our Minds: The Power of Being Creative* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2017), 128.

<sup>32</sup> Ahmed, *The Polymath: Unlocking the Power of Human Versatility*, 116.

burnout is gone, at least for the time being. It could quite easily re-emerge, however, if I'm not vigilant. Burnout is a perpetual possibility fostered by hard-set societal conditions that are nearly, but not wholly, impossible to overcome. The trick is to be actively non-complacent, to be purposefully aware of opportunities for exploration and fresh experience. To strive to be Curious and Imaginative. Easier said than done, yes, but I gave it a go.

## 5 CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE!

You are invited by anyone to do anything  
 You are invited for all time...  
 You are so needed by everyone to do everything  
 You are invited for all time

– The Dismemberment Plan, “You Are Invited”

Starting in late January until the literal last moment (and beyond), I worked twelve to sixteen-hour days, no less than six days a week. This rigorous work schedule took a physical and mental toll. Twenty pounds melted off my frame. My hands became calloused, bloody, blistered, and bruised. My back began to scream from all the hunching I did over worktables. I had to buy new work boots because my trusty engineer boots didn’t provide enough arch support while I incessantly stomped from one end of the concrete-floored studio to the other.

As I toiled day and night in every corner of the sculpture studio at 246 Edgewood Ave., these bodily effects became a key element in my polymathic experiment. While it’s technically true that throughout my career I’ve “worked with my hands,” designing work on a computer is not the same as being physically altered by the creative process. I wasn’t just making things. Things were *remaking* me.

Some of the pieces turned out to be successful, some didn’t. Some took on entirely different meanings than I originally intended. I overestimated my abilities and underestimated the amount of time certain processes required. Nearly everything I endeavored to create involved learning and developing brand new skillsets. I’ve been dabbling in woodworking and dimensional design for a while, but never to the scale I attempted with the collection of objects I produced for this thesis work. Throughout the entire process, through triumphs and defeats alike, there was always joy.

The entire show was an experiment, every object in it a prototype. The primary goal of the experiment was to find a navigable path through burnout via a tactile reconnection with craft and

design exploration. Parallel to this aim, I wanted to explore ways in which a practical/professional-based design curriculum could be supplemented with opportunity for consequence-free creative experimentation. Both ideas eventually synthesized into *Choose Your Own Adventure!*

Rather than statically present my examination of burnout and my ideas about how to work through it, I elected instead to create an environment in which the viewer was invited to participate and experience the works directly. The three experiential areas of the exhibit were completely open for the audience to explore and interact. Accompanying the core experiential components of the show were two point-of-reference pieces, installed to broaden the context a bit for the viewer. Some unexpected and exciting surprises arose from the inclusion of these, as I'll recount later. All told, I'd call my experiment a success.

## 5.1 You Are Invited: Invitations One & Two

Some of my favorite examples of collaborative design work are the restroom walls in the dive bars around Atlanta, the city I've lived in for 25 years. Every so often the bar owners will paint over the tags, scrape off the stickers, and the patrons are gifted with four to seven fresh, clean canvases on which they can plaster their whims and musings. Every facet of the human experience can be witnessed in a brief trip to these blessed vestibules. Without prompting, the inebriated citizenry will cover the surfaces with political rhetoric, woeful romantic pleas, metaphysical ramblings, and profane epitaphs and eulogies for fallen friends. Embedded in this visual cacophony are the widely-shared creative yearnings of a people under pressure. These yearnings are the core inspiration for *You Are Invited: Invitations One & Two*.



Fig. 8 Jordan D. Gum. *EARL's Men's Room Walls*, 2022

In *Invitations One & Two*, I invited viewers to fill up four initially blank canvases situated on the opposite sides of the galley space. Although not specifically labeled as such, these were collaborative design exercises that represented theoretical design curriculum supplements. I drew upon my research in the tactile history of graphic design practice and was pedagogically inspired by the work of Josef Albers and David Reinfurt, as discussed earlier. Throughout the duration of the exhibit, viewers responded to different prompts with a rotating set of limited materials to use. Though the prompts and available tools changed, the compositions remained, to be added to, altered, mutated, and reinterpreted with each new hand that encountered them.

They had a funny little life.



Fig. 9 Jordan D. Gum. *Invitation ONE: Q&A*, in-progress, 2022. (Photo credit: Travis Dodd)



Fig. 10 Jordan D. Gum. *Invitation TWO: Call/Response*, in-progress, 2022. (Photo credit: Travis Dodd)



I mounted the prompt placards for *Invitation One: Q&A* and *Invitation Two: Call/Response* between the canvases. The initial batch of materials viewers could use were placed on the floor in front of them. My original idea was to place the materials on a table, but I had run out of time and energy to build this component of the show. However, the informality of putting things on the floor turned out to be an accidental success. It beckoned the viewer to get down with the party of it all. After the basic parts of the experience were in place, I made the first marks of response on each blank field to break the ice and encourage participation. Throughout the rest of the week, I continued to place the available materials on the floor. The resulting chaos was one of the most interesting outcomes of the entire *CYOA* experiment. By the end of the show's run, all four canvases were filled.



Fig. 11 Jordan D. Gum *Evidence of Participation*, 2022.





Fig. 12 Visitors contributing to *Invitation TWO: Call/Response*.

## 5.2 Fireside Chat

In contrast to *You Are Invited*, *Fireside Chat* was an experiment with mixed results. Although viewers seemed to enjoy it, this part of my exhibition didn't match the expectations I set for myself. This area of the *CYOA* experience was intended to be a communal invitation to gather and rest. Burnout is an extremely lonely condition, though most people experience it at some point in their lives. No one is immune, but each individual's experience is drastically different. I conceived of *Fireside Chat* as a space of reprieve and commiseration, but this part of the project fell short of its goal.

### 5.2.1 *The Nostalginator™ Fireside, Mk I, 2022*

This piece, despite all its flaws, was the only real success of this sub-collection from the show. A truly polymathic undertaking, *The Nostalginator™ Fireside Mk. I* ranks as my most complex undertaking. Thoroughly experimental in every corner, it brought into play nearly every tactile and digital skill I already possessed, pushed those beyond their limits, and then tacked on a bunch of new ones. Represented here in this oddball amalgam of material is all the exploration done during my time in grad school: iterating and responding to how different materials and processes react to each other; internally examining the personal and societal influences that form the conceptual roots of an idea; removing oneself from the safe and familiar boundaries of their experience and becoming open to unintended outcomes. All of these and more occurred during the making of this strange little box designed to give viewers a sense of comfort and ease.

When I was growing up, we had a terribly dangerous contraption in our living room. It was a space heater embedded in a fake fireplace and mantle. The “fire” was a rotating lighting component that sat above the heating element. That sat on top of the green shag carpet. It was a constant fixture in my childhood. We’d turn it on when it got very cold during the winter. We strung garland across the top shelf and hung our stockings on it at Christmastime. Television was also ever-present in my formative years, as it still is. I can remember waiting anxiously to watch the new episode of *X-Files* every Friday night and taping all the dystopian science fiction movies I could manage during the HBO and Showtime free preview weekends.

Now, as I find myself with a growing urge to disconnect from the onslaught of streaming media in our culture, *The Nostalginator™ Fireside Mk I* emerged as a self-contrasting ode to both my wistful memories of youthful pop culture inspiration and my drive to simplify and temper its presence in my current life. To find quiet and peace in a different kind of warm glow.



Fig. 13 Jordan D. Gum. *The Nostalginator™ Fireside, Mk I*, 2022. Scrap wood, steel, laser-cut, vacuum-formed, and dyed acrylic, steel, custom electric drivetrain and control circuits, vintage and modern controls, LED lighting.





Fig. 14 A Visitor plays with *The Nostalginator™ Fireside, Mk. I*.



Fig. 15 Jordan D. Gum. *The Nostalginator™ Fireside, Mk. I*, 3D model design, 2022.

The most significant “side effect” of the making of *The Nostalginator™ Fireside Mk. I* was the creation of the show’s core branding element. When designing the hubs for the firewheel that rotates behind *The Nostalginator™*’s screen, positive and negative space were created. The positive space was the shape that the needed component would take. The negative space was the empty area between the shapes—cut-outs from the stylized spokes. When physically producing the parts, however, new separate *things* came into existence. The negative space wasn’t just white pixels on a screen but became a tangible object that could be held and considered in space. These unintended creations took on a meaning of their own.

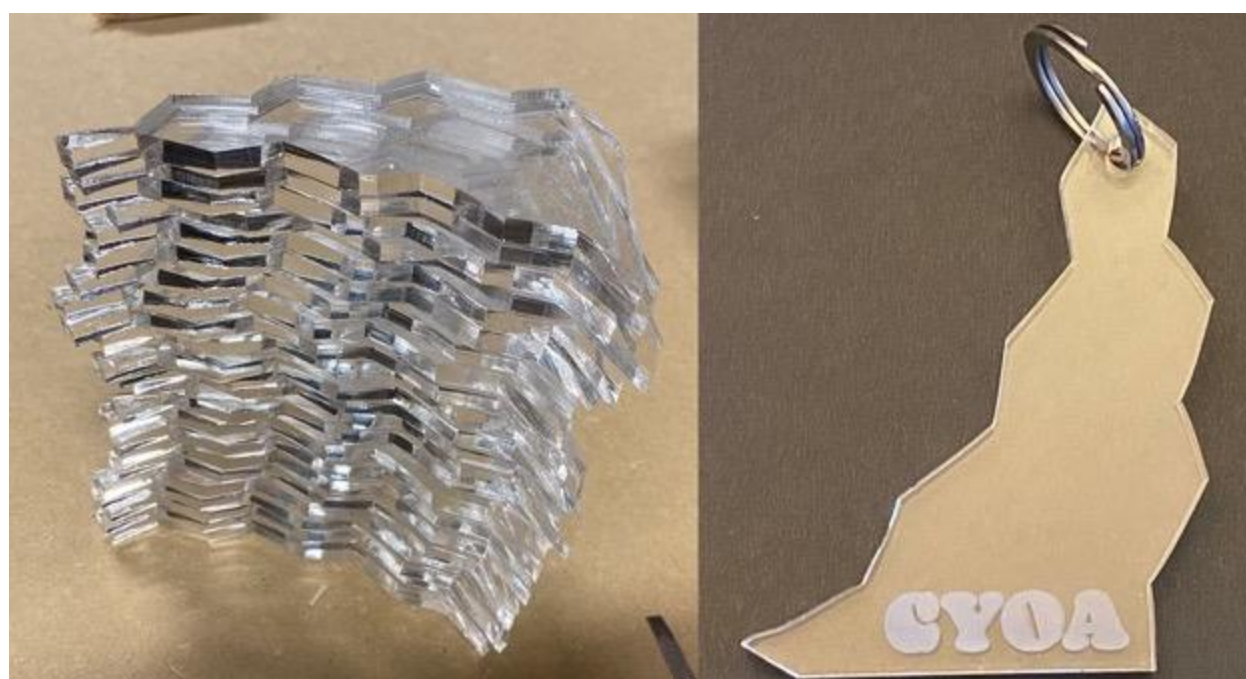


Fig. 16 Firewheel offcuts, later repurposed as souvenir keychains for *Choose Your Own Adventure!*

The offcut pieces from the spokes formed very similar, yet subtly unique, shapes. At first, they were just a visually interesting phenomenon, but as I flipped them around in my hand, a notion of function became apparent and the concept of the takeaway/leave-behind, a staple in the graphic design world, sprang to mind. So, I repurposed the offcut shapes as keychain souvenirs for the show (limited edition, of course). After reflecting on them further, the shapes began to resemble



abstracted winding roads; if layered on top of one another, they became diverging paths. Thus, the base form for the *Choose Your Own Adventure!* logo was birthed.

Later, when it came time to construct the dimensional logo sign, physicality was again a deciding and directing force in the final execution. To say that I encountered many hurdles and was eventually humbled by my materials in making this sign is a gross understatement. In short, I had to abandon my original plan due to over-optimistic bravado. A necessarily hard pivot produced a final result that was more pleasing and appropriate than my initial design.



Fig. 17 Jordan D. Gum. *Choose Your Own Adventure!* logo design, 2022.



Fig. 18 Jordan D. Gum. *Choose Your Own Adventure!* logo sign, 2022.

The key lessons learned all came from my tactile interaction with the work. Typically, a designer's focus tends to stay on "The Plan." Though it may occur to the veteran designer to explore negative space for potential conceptual fodder, ideas don't literally fall into your hands. Those little moments of serendipity only occur when you meet your craft on an equal plane of existence. (PS: Visitors snatched those keychains right up! People love free stuff.)



Fig. 19 *Choose Your Own Adventure!* logo sign, installed.

### 5.2.2 FDR's Precarious Ribcage I & II, 2022

These chairs were meant, along with the unfinished *I Double-Dare Ya* bench, to comprise the seating in the area that was to be *Fireside Chat*. They were unsuccessful. When I finally tightened the last nut on the spine of *FDR'S Precarious Ribcage I*, I flopped triumphantly upon my creation and was immediately catapulted backwards into the dividing wall in the center of the gallery. Springs are really springy, as my bruised body and dented ego can attest.

I set out to create something that forced me to learn new things, and I certainly did. So, what did I learn? First: Plan for time to test things. Second: Roll with the punches.

I kept these “chairs of doom” in my show but made small signs that warned visitors not to sit in them. Third: Nothing’s ever finished. This lesson isn’t a new one to me; it’s something I’ve espoused throughout my career. *FDR'S Precarious Ribcage I & II*, however, gave me a chance to deliver something in an un-ready state. These are prototypes, but because no client is waiting for them, I have an infinite number of chances to redesign, re-execute, and refine. That opportunity to start over or try again is missing from creating-as-occupation.



Fig. 20 Jordan D. *Gum FDR's Precarious Ribcage I*, 2022. Cherry hardwood, birch plywood, steel, scrap fabric, recycled denim batting, cast concrete. (Photo credit: Jac Kuntz)





Fig. 21 Jordan D. Gum. *Fireside Chat*, 2022. (Photo credit: Travis Dodd)

### 5.2.3 *I Double-Dare Ya (Incomplete)*, 2022 - ???

During the penultimate meeting with my thesis committee, it was suggested that *Fireside Chat* felt more like a stage where the viewers would be expected to perform, rather than a place of refuge, as intended. The proposed solution was to build a bench to close the circle of interaction within the space. Although I attempted to realize this solution, the production of the *I Double-Dare Ya* bench was an almost-immediate and expensive catastrophe. The diabolical combination of a complex design and a difficult-to-master technique torpedoed the whole build. The piece had to be set aside and eventually abandoned in favor of completing other, more essential components of the exhibit. Like *FDR's Precarious Ribcage*, this part of the project isn't complete and may never be. I plan to revisit it in my own time, using my own methods, and see this first iteration completed. From there,

I'll assess the successes and failures encountered, evolve the design and production process for the next incarnation, and give it another go.



Fig. 22 Jordan D. Gum. *I Double-Dare Ya*, 3D model design, 2022.



Fig. 23 *I Double-Dare Ya* leg hole mortising setup, March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

### 5.3 Sausage Makins

This collection of remnants, iterative detritus, and out-of-context stuff represents all the unseen effort that is expended behind the scenes before a final result is revealed: the work that goes into the work, in other words. As viewers and consumers, we only encounter the culmination of all the effort and don't see the mountain of mistakes, hard lessons, and finagling that goes into the act of creation. Sometime during my creative expedition, it occurred to me that it would be a good idea to keep a record of all that messy, hidden effort. I don't delude myself that all viewers will be enthralled by this assemblage, but I do think it might stoke the imaginations of some like-minded people.



Fig. 24 Jordan D. Gum. *Sausage Makins*, 2022. Templates, tools, remnants, iterative errors. (Photo credit: Jac Kuntz)



Fig. 25 Jordan D. Gum. *Sausage Makins*, detail, 2022.

#### 5.4 Catalytic Concoction

Another assemblage rounds out the roster of misfits that is *Choose Your Own Adventure!*. This asymmetrical piece is made up of three components: *Mjölnir, Jr.*, *I Dare Ya*, and *Reading Rainbow*. It could be classified as a prequel to the main collection and should be interpreted as symbolic of the initial scattered explorations and musings that led up to everything I produced. Here again, I present viewers with a window into the creative process rather than the results of it. I placed these items at the beginning of the journey, but left viewers free to determine their own path through the exhibit. Because following someone else's map isn't really choosing *your own* adventure, is it?





Fig. 26 Jordan D. Gum. *Catalytic Concoction*, 2022. Stool, mallet, books.

#### 5.4.1 *Mjölnir, Jr., 2021*

This piece was the first foray into several fresh experiences. It was the opportunity to expand my limited woodworking palette to include turning. The handle was created on a lathe from a hunk of pecan trunk scavenged locally by the sculpture studio manager, the previously thanked Nimer Aleck, II. It was under his tutelage during a directed study in the Fall of 2021 that I was gifted with the lion's share of the skills I employed in the making of the entire exhibit. With his help, the first object I made was a tool: the handy and reliable mallet. The mallet/hammer has been a staple in the creation of human-centric objects since we first started using tools. Creating my first mallet was a special metaphysical undertaking: I made a thing that I used to make other things. It also represents

a marriage between my newly-learned and tried-and-trusted modes of creativity. Along with the traditional method of wood turning employed in the crafting of *Mjölnir, Jr.*, I also brought into play my graphic design skills, as well as modern means of production in the form of laser engraving.



Fig. 27 Jordan D. Gum. *Mjölnir, Jr.*, 2021. Lathe-turned pecan, laminated cherry, twine, wood glue, cast resin in laser etching.

#### 5.4.2 *I Dare Ya, 2021*

The self-assigned goal for this piece was to conceptualize and build a stool that shouldn't be sittable. Inspired by the stool featured in the Netflix series *Flaked*, I took the elegant symmetry of that design, squatted it down, turned it into a stubby little acute triangle, and gave it square legs. This “stern lesson” proved to be an audacious undertaking for an amateur woodworker. The number of problems I encountered are too numerous to detail here. In short: creating three unique, angled

mortise holes nearly drove me mad; I broke off one of the seat corners; sloppy epoxy repairs left pieces of yoga mat bonded to the feet; I gouged the seat surface during leg stump removal; and overcompensating for the gouging left noticeable dips in the smooth plateau of the seat top. In the end, I turned a week-long project into a two-month ordeal and was solidly satisfied with the outcome, especially when I hopped on top of it and it easily bore the weight of both my not-insubstantial frame and equally foolhardy intentions.

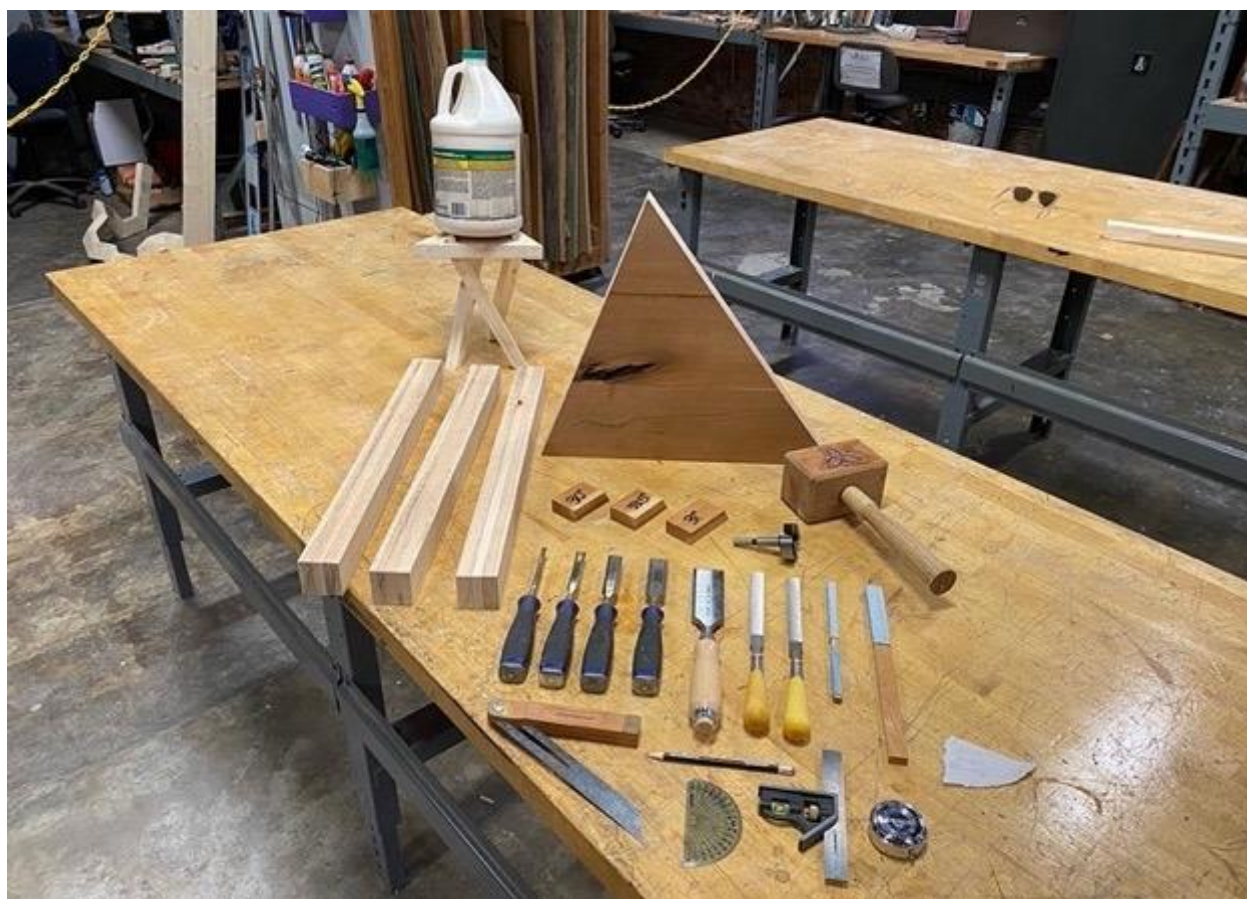


Fig. 28 In-studio tool display during production of *I Dare Ya*, November, 2021.





Fig. 29 Jordan D. Gum. *I Dare Ya*, 2021. Cherry and oak hardwood, steel, pigmented cast resin.



### 5.4.3 *Reading Rainbow, 2022*

Last, but not least, comes *Reading Rainbow*. On the suggestion of Dr. Susan Richmond, a member of my thesis committee, this component of *Catalytic Concoction* is made up of (almost) all the readings from my year of research. During the show's reception, a friend asked if I'd read everything in the stack. The answer was "No," but I got what I needed from what I did ingest and aspire to read more deeply... eventually.

Some of the texts provided technical support and are quoted throughout the preceding sections of this



Fig. 30 Jordan D. Gum. *Reading Rainbow*, 2022. Assemblage of research texts (*Mjöltnir*, Jr. assumed to be placed by a gallery visitor in response to *Invitation ONE: Q&A*).

paper. Others, as stated in the wall label, were absorbed osmotically. Some of these readings cast me into a depressive state, as with *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction* and *The Neoliberalization of Creativity Education*. Then there were books that lifted me back up out of despair and provided optimistic inspiration for the work in this exhibit and the work yet to come, such as Jenny Odell's *How To Do Nothing* and David Reinfurt's *A \*New\* Program for Graphic Design*. Whether absorbed fully or in part, this collection of thoughts and examinations represents, simply: As long as the human mind is curious and restless, the strangling weeds of burnout can be uprooted, and new and different growth can flourish.

## 5.5 Souvenirs

After the brief week of display was over, I spent a Saturday dismantling all the oversized menagerie that signified the end of my graduate studies. The thrill of completing the work and sharing it with friends and colleagues at the reception was bitterly counterbalanced by a surprising sadness at tearing it all down. The entire undertaking feels like ball lightning: it exists only in the memory of those who were there to witness and take part in it. Which is the special kind of magic I sought in the first place.



Fig. 31 A student contributes to *Invitation TWO: Call/Response*, March 31st, 2022.



Fig. 32 Visitors to the *CYOA!* reception participating in *Invitation ONE: Q&A*, March 31st, 2022.



Fig. 33 Students participating in *Invitation ONE: Q&A*, March 31st, 2022.



I do possess the physical objects that facilitated the experience of the show, of course. That's something. I'll live with those until they become too cumbersome, and then I'll dismantle or repurpose them. But for now, they're here, tangible proof of what I accomplished. I've also got a phone full of images that I can flip back through whenever the urge strikes me. Still, I feel a lingering yearning for the actual experience. What's to be done with that restlessness? Where do we go from here?



Fig. 34 Uninstalling of *Choose Your Own Adventure!*, April 2nd, 2022.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

I may never get what I want  
But I'm happy to just die tryin'

- Soul Asylum, "Can't Even Tell"

"Conclusion" has such a melancholy ring of finality to it. Let's go with "Revelations," instead. Apocalyptic connotations aside, it feels like a more appropriate moniker for the summary of this wild three-year trip. Here's what I've done with the knowledge I've gained through study and action...

Thanks to author Jenny Odell, I've shut off all but a few streaming services and leave my phone downstairs when I go to bed. I've got piles of unread books stacked up around my house that I'm starting to work my way through. I'm also considering a road trip to the Grand Canyon. I haven't been there since I was a kid and I'd like to see what's changed. In terms of polymathy, I've found new enthusiasm for experimenting and exploration. I've got some new personal art projects brewing, and the other disciplines I was exposed to during my MFA studies are playing significant roles. I'm accepting some new professional opportunities that spark my interest and declining ones that don't.

My most long-lasting souvenir from this experience occurred to me during an arbitrary train of thought about mechanical minutiae: becoming a student again has made me a better teacher. Finding myself both instructed and instructing, I was able to parlay the experience of the former into the latter. When my students were frustrated, stuck, lost or just exhausted, I had a fresh point of reference and sympathy for them. This renewal was invaluable whenever I needed to alter course, revisit or refine a lecture, or check in with and encourage the quiet students.

Oh, and that gazebo in my backyard? Like several of the other objects discussed in this document, it's incomplete. I'm working on it, though, and probably will be for a while. I'm okay

with that. It's the adventure that matters. Even though, historically speaking, I'm antisocial, maybe I'll even invite some friends over and we can enjoy it together. After all, adventures are more fun when they're shared with good company.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Fireside Chat



Fig. 35 *Fireside Chat*, etched acrylic wall label (scan)



Fig. 36 *Fireside Chat*, installed



*Appendix A.1: The Nostalginator™ Fireside Mk. I – Build*



Fig. 37 *Nostalginator™ Fireside Mk. I* - Firewheel edge tapping jig setup



Fig. 38 *Nostalginator™ Fireside Mk. I* screen vacuum forming, failed iteration





Fig. 39 *Nostalginator™ Fireside Mk. I* - slatted box, in-progress



Fig. 40 *Nostalginator™ Fireside Mk. I* - seamless slatted box, standing dry mockup





Fig. 41 *Nostalginator™ Fireside Mk. I* - legs, post-shaping



Fig. 42 *Nostalginator™ Fireside Mk. I* - Firewheel flame paddles sequence layout





Fig. 43 *Nostalginator™ Fireside Mk. I* - prototype control circuit build w/ Andrew Elstner



Fig. 44 *Nostalginator™ Fireside Mk. I* - interior mirrored panels mockup



*Appendix A.2: FDR's Precarious Ribcage I & II – Build*

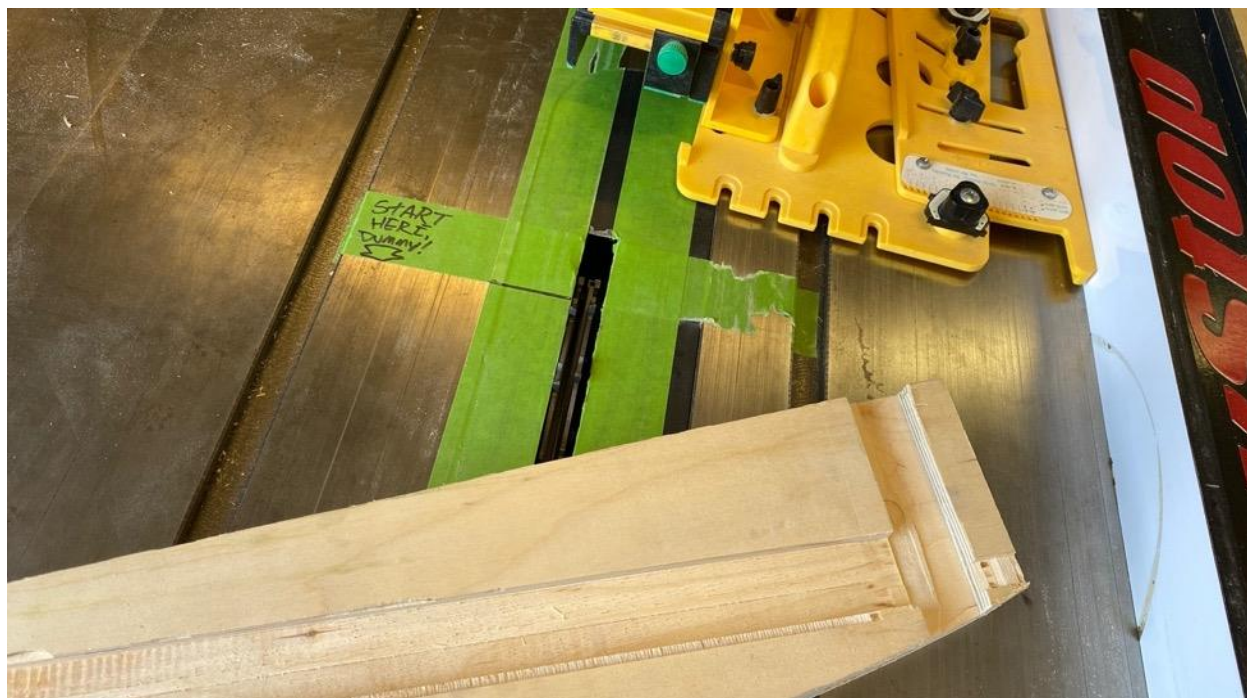


Fig. 45 FDR's *Precarious Ribcage I & II*, seat parts, in-progress



Fig. 46 FDR's *Precarious Ribcage I & II*, dry fitting seat parts





Fig. 47 Steam bending “antler” fabrication



Fig. 48 Steam bending “antler” fabrication





Fig. 49 FDR's *Precarious Ribcage I & II*, steam setup for chair back slats



Fig. 50 FDR's *Precarious Ribcage I & II*, steam bending setup with modified forms



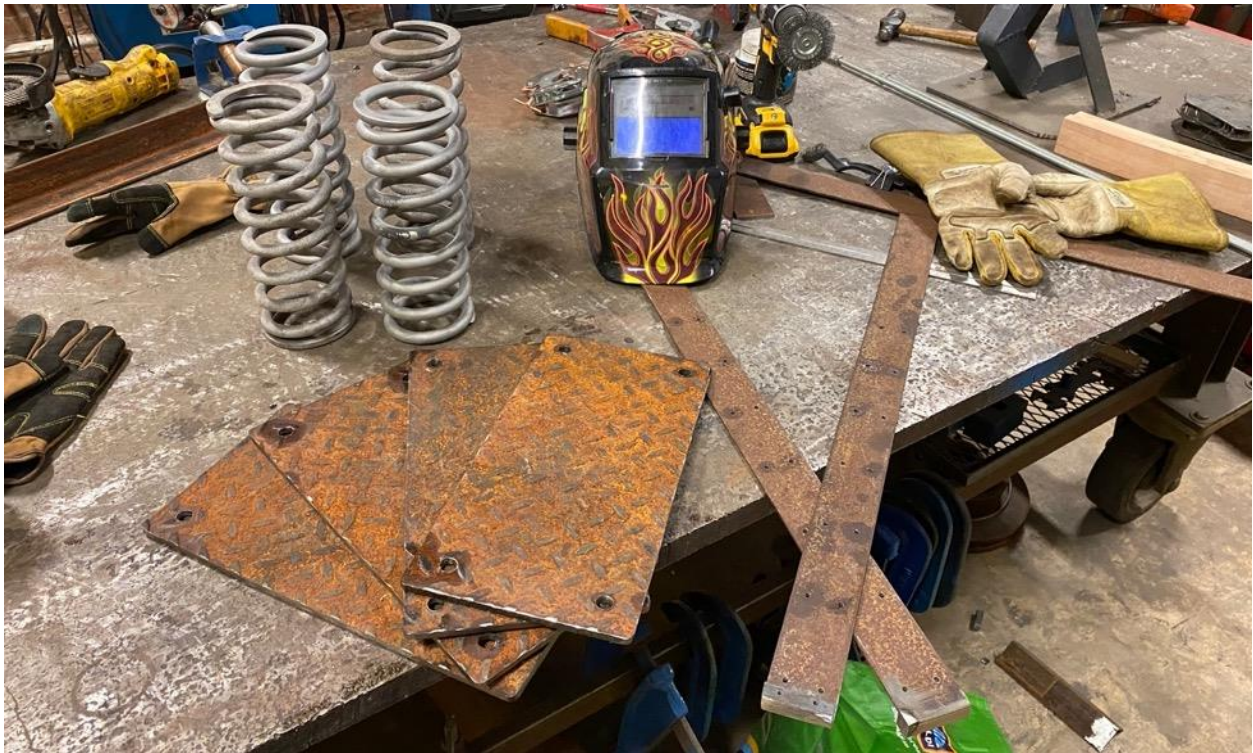


Fig. 51 FDR's *Precarious Ribcage I & II*, base plate and spine fabrication



Fig. 52 FDR's *Precarious Ribcage I & II*, completed cast concrete bases with coil spring "legs"



## Appendix B: You Are Invited



Fig. 53 *You Are Invited*, etched acrylic wall label (scan)



Fig. 54 *Invitation ONE: Q&A*, prompt placard (condition at exhibit run's end)

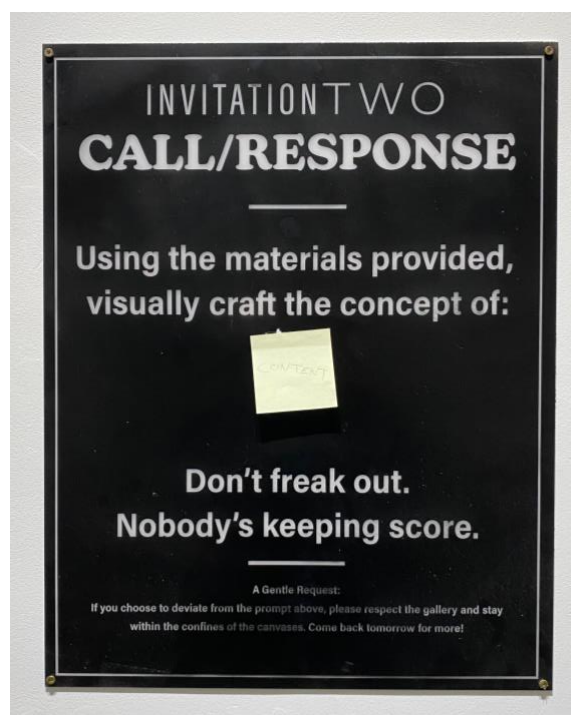


Fig. 55 *Invitation TWO: Call/Response* placard

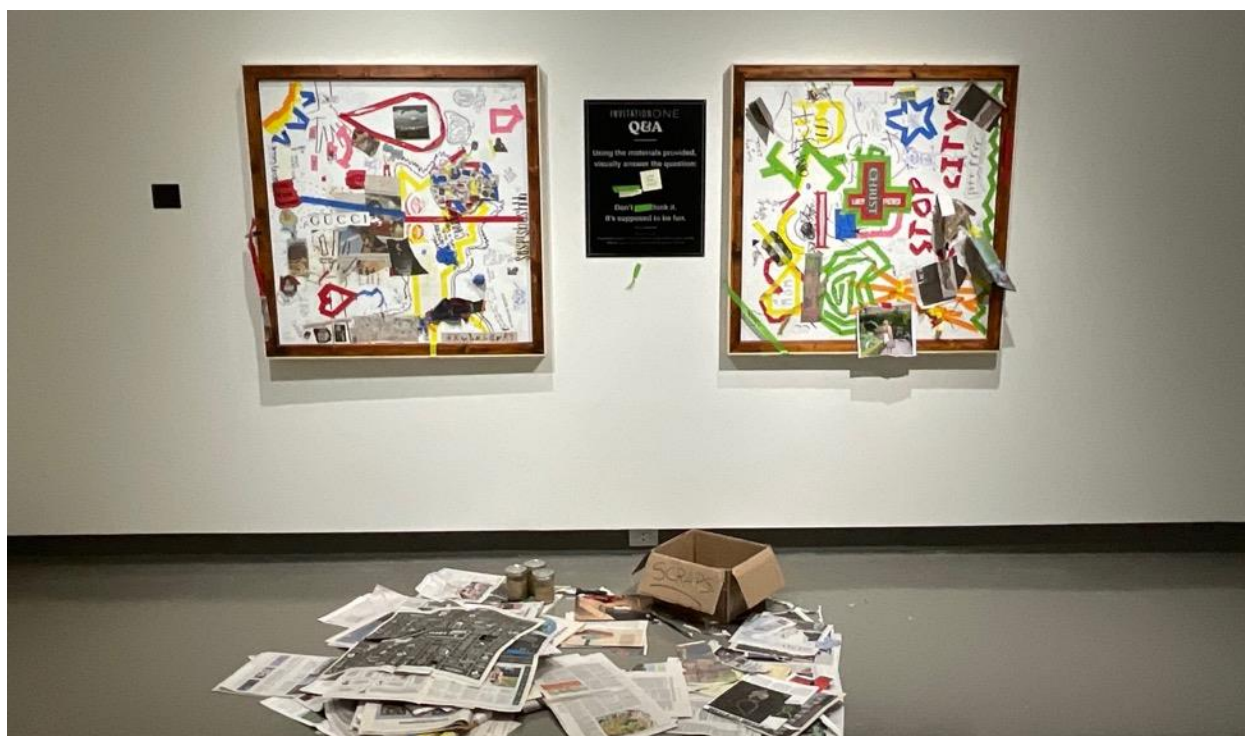


Fig. 56 *Invitation ONE: Q&A*, installed and active



Fig. 57 *Invitation TWO: Call/Response*, installed and active



*Appendix B.1: You Are Invited – Prompt Participation Results*



Fig. 58 *Invitation ONE: Q&A, activity detail*



Fig. 59 *Invitation ONE: Q&A, activity detail*





Fig. 60 *Invitation TWO: Call/Response*, activity detail

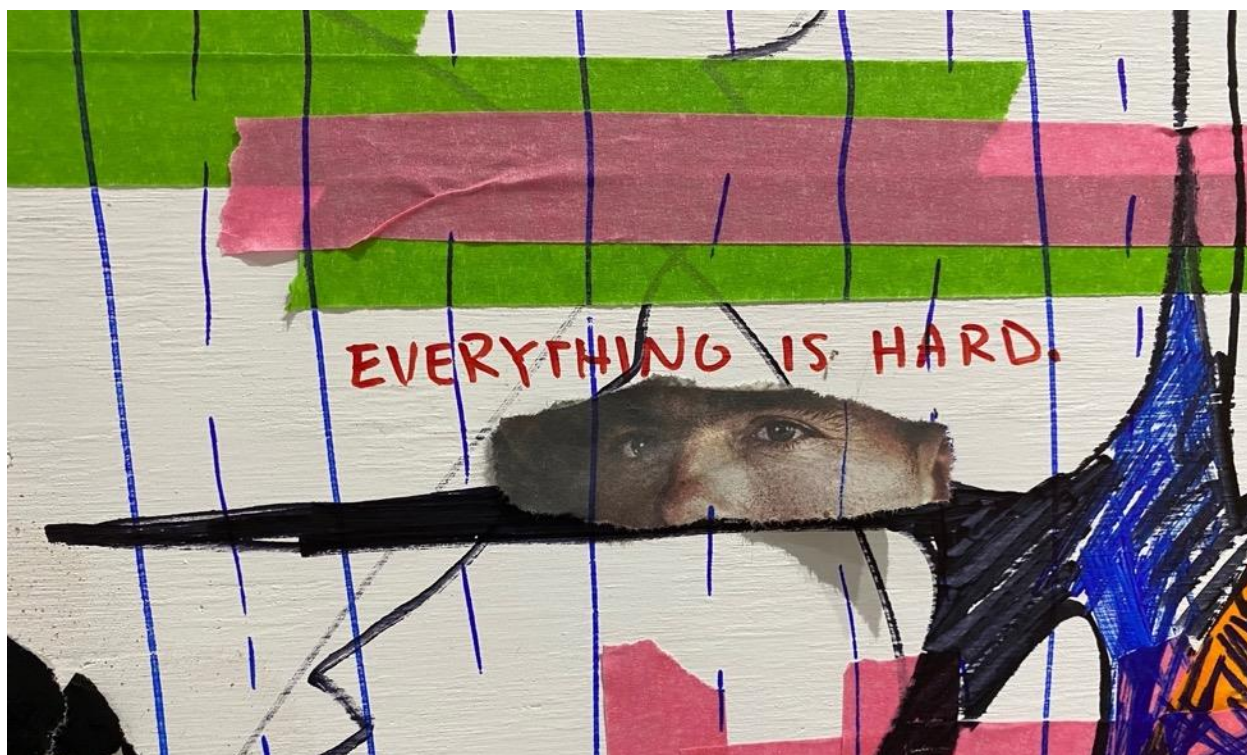


Fig. 61 *Invitation TWO: Call/Response*, activity detail





Fig. 62 *Invitation TWO: Call/Response*, activity detail

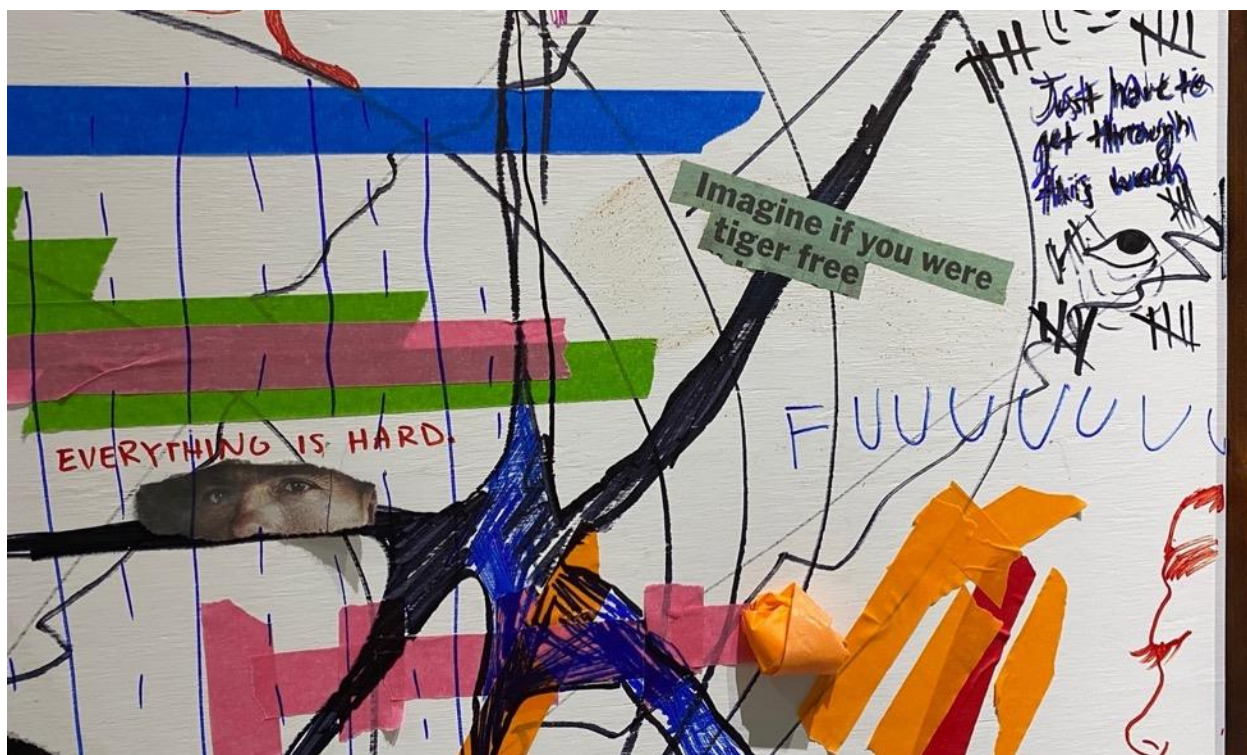


Fig. 63 *Invitation TWO: Call/Response*, activity detail





Fig. 64 *Invitation TWO: Call/Response*, activity detail

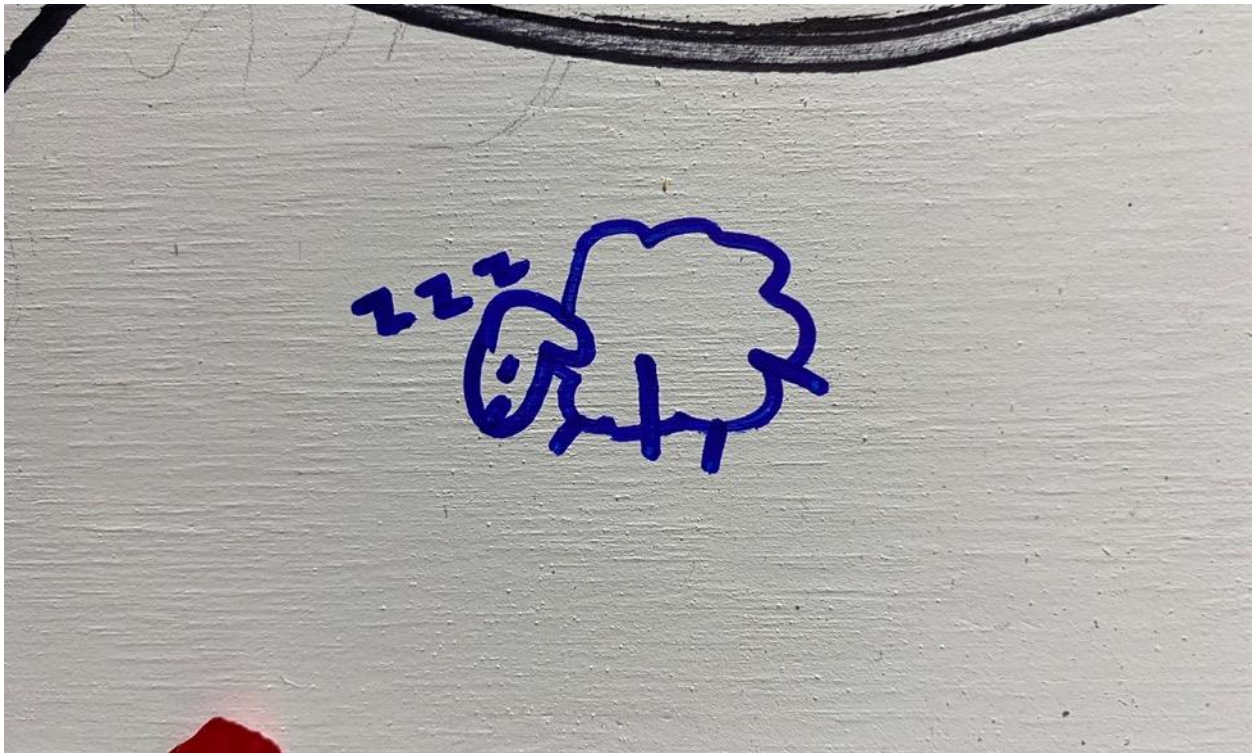


Fig. 65 *Invitation TWO: Call/Response*, activity detail



*Appendix B.1: Invitations ONE & TWO, - Build*



Fig. 66 *Invitations ONE & TWO*, canvas painting (Photo credit: David Robertson)



Fig. 67 *Invitations ONE & TWO*, canvas paint booth setup





Fig. 68 *Invitations ONE & TWO*, canvases in-progress



Fig. 69 *Invitations ONE & TWO*, canvas frame and mounting cleats pieces





Fig. 70 *Invitations ONE & TWO*, canvas frame pieces finishing



Fig. 71 *Invitations ONE & TWO*, canvas frame pieces finishing



Appendix C: *Choose Your Own Adventure!* exhibit reception, March 31, 2022



Fig. 72 *Choose Your Own Adventure!* reception



Fig. 73 *Choose Your Own Adventure!* reception – students participating in *You Are Invited*



Fig. 74 *Choose Your Own Adventure!* reception – students participating in *You Are Invited*



Fig. 75 *Choose Your Own Adventure!* reception – students participating in *You Are Invited*





Fig. 76 *Choose Your Own Adventure!* reception – visitors participating in *You Are Invited*



Fig. 77 *Choose Your Own Adventure!* reception – visitor participating in *You Are Invited*

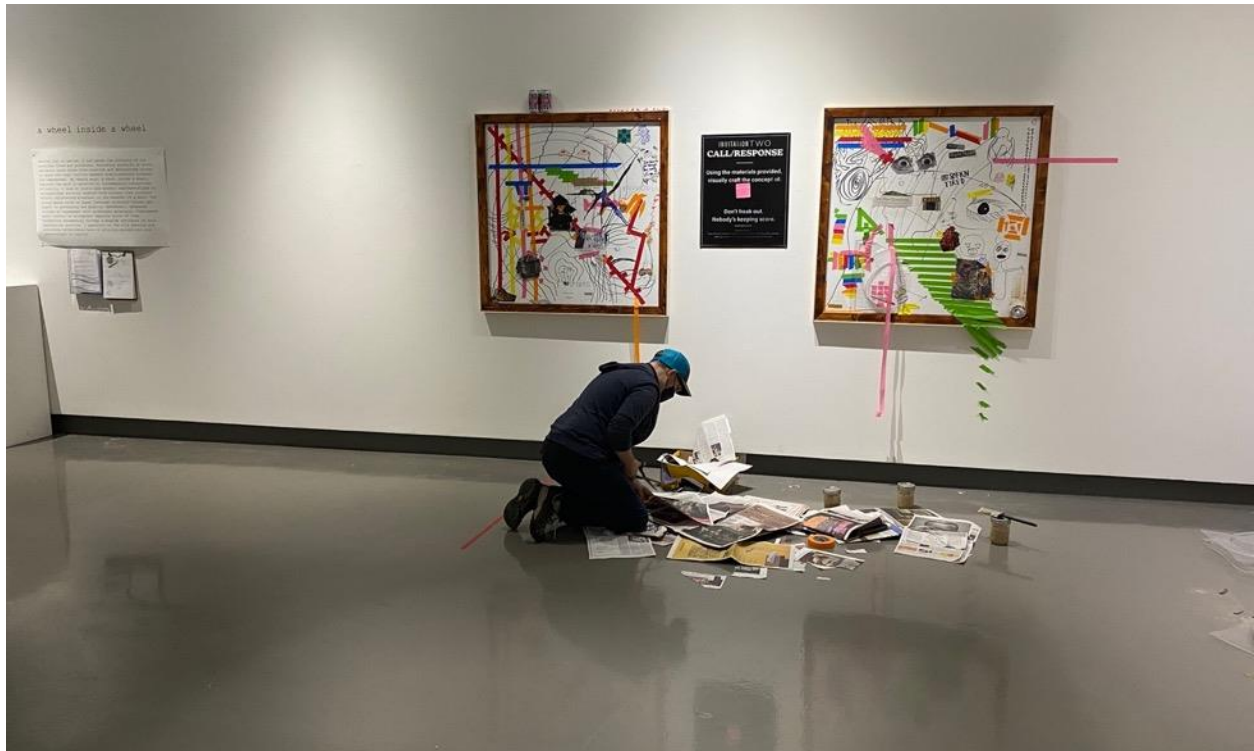


Fig. 78 *Choose Your Own Adventure!* reception – visitor participating in *You Are Invited*



Fig. 79 *Choose Your Own Adventure!* reception – visitors participating in *You Are Invited*