

# The Dynamic Dot

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**Abstract**

Over the past decades, visual design has evolved from solely being a mean of form and function, to acting as a mean of communication and problem solving. This shift in paradigm is reflecting on the purpose of the practice; from designing things to designing interpretations.

Instead of exploring change as a problem, this research explores change as a statement. However, the constantly reshaping professional role; in terms of identity, position, purpose and practice, is identified as an issue. The problem statement is studied by looking at the various forms of the T-shape model as a visual metaphor of the changing role. The research explores the existing models and suggest that the role should be dynamic to the changing environment of today – similar to the way the products of design are dynamic to a digital environment.

The result forms a bricolage of knowledge which is incorporated into an improved model. Throughout the thesis, the T reshapes into a *human-shaped person*, a model introduced as a reaction to the stated problem. The outcome of the research is twofold; (1) a proposed visual and theoretical improvement of the existing models, and (2) an entry to the critical debate of the field.

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**Keywords** T-shaped person, visual communication design, design theory, dynamic environment, 21<sup>st</sup> century, critical debate, critical design, paradigm shift

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

# Forced by change

Development is an act of expansion. With every discovery, the extent of knowledge required to understand and practice in the world grows more complex. Cognitive scientist Don Norman (1993) describes development as something that brings change to the society, thereby leading to an expanded amount of information and technique to comprehend; more to know, more to learn, more to master (1993, p. 8). Visual communication design – as any knowledge – expands with the development it is exposed to, thereby affected by societal, cultural, economic, digital and global changes in the world. As the discourse for design is developing faster than ever before, the field is currently in severe change (Littlejohn 2017, p. 33–34). Over recent decades, the practice of visual design has evolved from solely being a mean of beauty, to acting as a mean of communication and problem-solving. This shift in paradigm is reflecting on the purpose of the practice; from designing things to designing interpretations (Kazmierczak 2003, p. 47–48).

“The content of a design no is longer sought in the artefact itself. It becomes a receiver’s thought, which is constructed through the receiver’s contact with a design. As such, it is created and owned by the receiver. Without the receiver’s inferring the meaning, there would be no content, nor a design.” (Kazmierczak 2003, p. 48)

Today, visual design has become a matter of using the accurate mean of communication (Redström 2005, p. 126) instead of merely being a matter of designing a product of form and function (Rand & Bierut 2014, p.9). This shift can be spotted in how the use of terminology recently has changed, as the term visual communication design has grown strong next to the more established term of graphic design. In the twenty-first century, the traditional craft of graphic design was pushed into a globalised communication context. The computer that started as a tool for production is today a dynamic platform for communication (Redström 2005, p. 124) filled with values, languages, norms, ideas and customs of societies all over the world – and all over the internet.

With globalisation and digitalisation, the platform for visual communication design not only grew enormous, but it also became dynamic. In reaction to this new dynamic setting, solutions as movement, responsiveness, variability and interactivity were incorporated in the creation of visual communication design. Discoveries, new technologies and new media are constantly remodelling the settings of the field, and in combination with a raised awareness to values like sustainability, equality and discrimination – the practice involves more knowledge and more challenges than ever before. Besides, individual disciplines rarely solve the compound problems of today (Davis & Hunt 2017, p. 7), and alongside the increasingly multifaceted environment of visual communication, the role and position of the visual communication designer cultivate in complexity. Consequently, the dynamic circumstances of today should not only change the way design looks, but it should also change the way we look at the designer.

### Problem statement

Instead of exploring change as a problem, this research explores change as a statement. As the field of visual communication design grows more complex, a need for exploring how the designer responds to this constant change of circumstances emerges.

However, the constant reshaping of the profession; in terms of identity, position, purpose and practice, is recognised as a problem and the research explores if the role should be dynamic to the changing environment of today – similar to the way the products of design are dynamic to the digital environment.

The range of material to research would be overwhelming without distinct parameters to analyse. Therefore, this thesis approaches the question area similarly to any task tackled by a visual communication designer: solving the problem by visual means. Instead of looking at the changing field of visual communication design as a whole, the research examines a collection of specific models used in the field of design: The  $\tau$ -shaped model (see figure 1) and the following modifications of it; the pi-shape, the I-shape, the reverse  $\tau$ , the comb-shape, the hasthag-shape, the E-shape, the X-shape and the M-shape (see figures 2–9, p. 9). The models conceptualise the problem statement and make it more graspable.

### Visualising the problem

The constant reshaping of the original  $\tau$  is interpreted as a reflection of how a dynamic and complex environment reshapes the visual communication designer. This change is examined as a phenomenon of interest, and implication of that the current variations of the  $\tau$ -shape are insufficient in responding to change. In reaction, the thesis aims to introduce an improved instance of the  $\tau$ -shaped model. The research intends to understand how visual communication designers currently respond to development, and explores how a dynamic quality could be incorporated into theory and practice in order to improve the model.

### Contribution to the field

The outcome of the thesis is twofold; a proposed visual and theoretical improvement of the existing models and an entry to the critical debate within the field. Likewise,



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**FIGURE 1** The T-shape.

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the product of the research takes a binary form, intended to be read both as bachelor's thesis and as a professional article. Therefore, the text follows the IMRAD structure often used in scientific writing (Wistedt 2008), rather than the traditionally logical disposition of a thesis. As the examined models are interpreted as a visual metaphor for the changing role of the visual communication designer, the proposed outcome should also be considered a contribution within the same context.

## 2 METHOD

# Forming a perception

The methodology outlines the methods used in the examination of the problem statement and developing the outcome. As this thesis partially aims to form a visual result, similar to a design product, the book *Design Research: Investigation for Successful Creative Solutions* (Leonard & Ambrose 2012) functions as a point of reference in formulating a suitable research process.

In the examination of the research statement, multiple qualitative research methods are used. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (2011), describe the role of the qualitative researcher as a *bricoleur*; a quilt-maker who brings pieces together to form new meaning. The bricolage approach leaves room for taking in methods during the process, to form the best possible understanding of the area. Denzin and Lincoln also define qualitative research as interdisciplinary, where the combination of multiple methods secures a deep understanding of the question (2011, p. 3–6). This is appropriate in the examination of the T-shaped model, as it is described in a similar way.

The research is approached with an open mind, and the methods are structured to benefit the final ideas of this thesis (Leonard & Ambrose 2012, p. 6). Qualitative and formative methodology are intertwined as a patchwork of methods to drive the research towards the aim of forming a visual, theoretical and critical result.

### Gathering visuals

The visual method gathers the many variations of the models and looks at the collection of shapes as a chain of reactions illustrating the problem statement. In the research, the changing role of the visual communication designer is identified and presented by the gathered visual material of the T-shape in development.

While visual means and visualisation are commonly recognised sources of information in the practice of visual communication design, the image-based approach is rarely used as a method for research (Posser, 2011, p. 97). While uncommon, the visual method is considered a part of qualitative methodology, and in this research used to form an understanding of the complex area of interest. In *Visual Methodology: Toward a more seeing research*, the term visualisation is described as the researchers' ability to form understandings and theories through conceptualisation, systematic processes and illustrations (Posser 2011, p. 479). Furthermore, the visual approach is suitable for shaping new theory within the field of visual communication design.

The variations of the T-shaped model are regarded as relevant in relation to the question area, since the models have been in use throughout the twenty-first century and therefore representing the contemporary practice of visual communication design.

Initially, the  $\tau$ -shaped model was an early response to how the world started to change with digitalisation. The  $\tau$ -shape was formed in the early 90's when the developments we today acknowledge as facts, were merely surfacing. In 1993 the *world wide web* was introduced to the public (home.cern), and Adobe Photoshop had been published in 1990 (Story, 2000), phenomena that we today recognise as fundamental changes in how design is created and distributed. The earliest known reference of the  $\tau$ -shape was introduced by journalist David Guest in the article, *The hunt is on for the Renaissance Man of computing*, published in The Independent (1991). Guest presents a *hybrid manager* with  $\tau$ -shaped skills, who relates to the full image as well as having in-depth knowledge in the field of IT and business. At this time, the  $\tau$ -shaped person was mainly introduced to the *computer society*. However, Guest pointed out that interdisciplinary skills are sought for in other branches than computing (1991). The concept of  $\tau$ -shaped skills was later popularised by Tim Brown, CEO and president of the design firm IDEO who borrowed the concept from the IT-field and transferred it to the field of design (Baratta 2017). In an interview by Morthen T. Hansen (2010), Tim Brown described the  $\tau$ -shape in the following words:

"T-shaped people have two kinds of characteristics, hence the use of the letter "T" to describe them. The vertical stroke of the "T" is a depth of skill that allows them to contribute to the creative process. That can be from any number of different fields: an industrial designer, an architect, a social scientist, a business specialist or a mechanical engineer. The horizontal stroke of the "T" is the disposition for collaboration across disciplines. It is composed of two things. First, empathy. It is important because it allows people to imagine the problem from another perspective- to stand in somebody else's shoes. Second, they tend to get very enthusiastic about other people's disciplines, to the point that they may start to practice them. T-shaped people have both depth and breadth in their skills." (Hansen, 2010)

In *The wellsprings of knowledge*, Dorothy Leonard-Barton (1995) describes the benefit of  $\tau$ -shaped skills from a business perspective. As employees, those who acquire  $\tau$ -shaped skills are extremely valuable in creating knowledge, enabling the full capacity of skills – both as individuals and in a team – by combining and integrating skills from multiple fields of expertise (Leonard-Barton 1995). In the article *On Being T-shaped* Tim Brown (2009) further describes the  $\tau$ -shaped person as someone with deep analytical skills (the vertical stroke) combined with great enthusiasm towards other skills (the horizontal stroke). He defines these people as highly adaptable, fast learners and ideal for management positions. Brown states being  $\tau$ -shaped as the key to success in the broad field of contemporary design (Brown 2009).

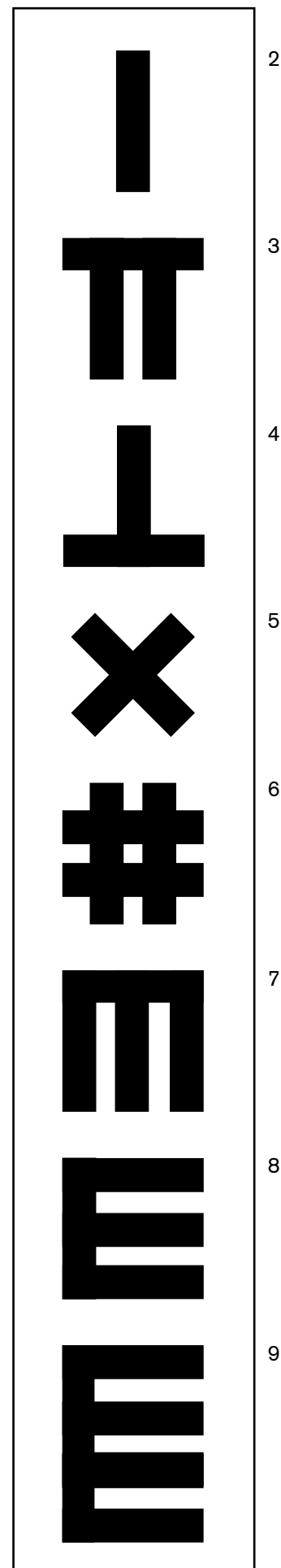
Today, the  $\tau$ -shape is a widely used model, and has generated various descriptions and uses in recent years. Ville Tervo (2015) describes the  $\tau$ -shaped designer as a person who is excellent at this one thing (the vertical stroke) and familiar with all the other



(the horizontal stroke). In his blog, writer Blaž Kos (2015) portrays the  $\tau$ -shaped person as a “razor that can cut through the complexity of the world”, through systematically combining specialities and areas. Also, the  $\tau$ -shape has even been sought after by employers to the extent that it has become the topic of an annual conference, the  $\tau$ -academy (Baratta 2017). Besides knowing other disciplines, the arrangers of summit open up the horizontal line to skills like teamwork, communication, perspective, networking, critical thinking, global understanding, project management. In addition, a need for professionals with  $\tau$ -shaped skills is addressed and points out the need for a change in the traditional education system (tsummit.org).

In this research, the  $\tau$ -shape is of interest as it has altered into a range of variations over the past decades (see figure 10). By looking at how the original  $\tau$ -shape has been reshaped, a change in the expectations and circumstances of the designer can be located. For instance, the  $\tau$ -shape is often contrasted to the I-shape (see figure 2); illustrating expertise in only one area, and described as a result of the conventional educational system (Lazier & Wilshere 2016). In addition, the pi-shaped person (see figure 3) is the most commonly seen modification; presenting a two-stemmed form of the  $\tau$  and describing a person with deepened skills in two areas in combination to the communicative skills (Tervo 2015). Then there is the reverse  $\tau$ -shape (Baratta 2017, see figure 4), the x-shape (Lazier & Wilshere 2016, see figure 5), the Hashtag-shape (Kos 2015, see figure 6), the M-shape (Van Der Aalst 2016, see figure 7), the E-shape (Akay 2015, see figure 8), the comb-shape (Sharma 2018, see figure 9) and, all implying to result in better outcomes than the original  $\tau$ .

**FIGURES 2-9** (2) The I-shaped model, (3) The Pi-shaped model, (4) The Reverse T-shaped model, (5) The X-shaped model, (6) The Hashtag-shaped model, (7) The M-shaped model, (8) The E-shaped model, and the (9) The comb-shaped model.



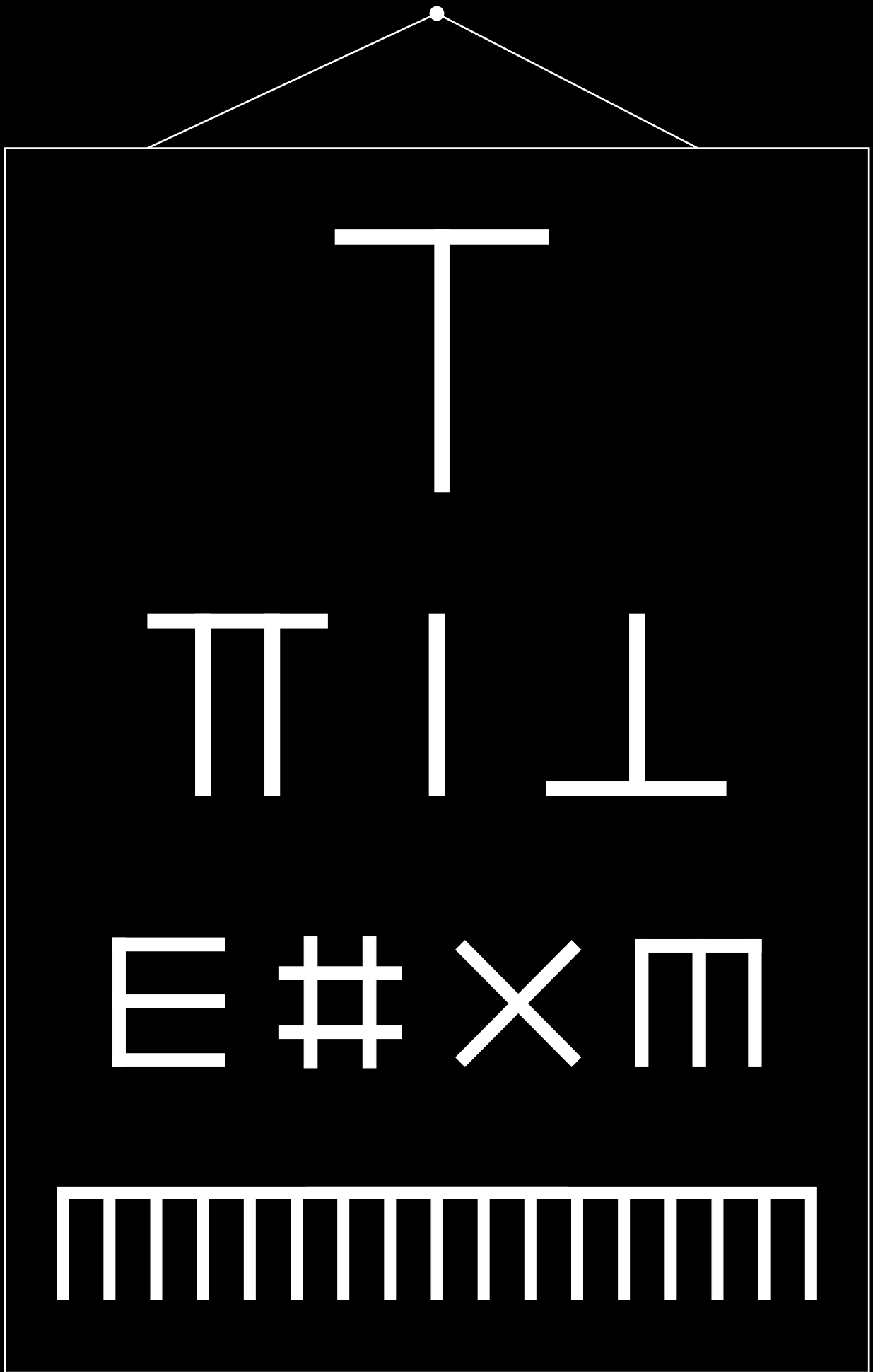


FIGURE 10 Chart of the changing view on the T-shaped person.

## Gathering thoughts

While the changing role is demonstrated and examined by visual means, more traditional approaches are applied to gather insights on the underlying changes. In-depth material is collected to find support and opposition to the research statement; that the visual communication designer should be dynamic to its changing environment. A couple of qualitative methods gathers the material: (1) unstructured interviews with experts from the visual communication design field, and (2) gathering significant writings to support and challenge the insights of the interviews (Denzin & Lincoln 2011, p. 4). Both approaches focus on finding perceptions on how the field has developed in the twenty-first century, and how these changes have been of impact to visual communication design.

This thesis is a contribution to the academic discourse and critical debate of the field. Therefore, the main insights are gathered from an academic point of view within the context of visual communication design. Also, the scholarly perspective is also interpreted as a reflection on both the practice, theory, and most importantly the future, of the discipline. However, my take on this matter as a design student is one-sided and insufficient in forming a full understanding. In order to broaden the perspective, more established insights are gathered to reveal a deeper understanding of the question area.

The research includes two in-depth conversations with experienced visual communication designers and researchers: Zach Dodson, professor of practice at Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand, and Arja Karhumaa, professor of practice at Aalto University, Helsinki, Finland. The conversations refer to a selection of prepared question areas: required designer attributes, design thinking and the future of the design field, to ponder on the current situation of the visual communication design field, as well as future opportunities and threats.

While the material is interpreted as conversations, the material is gathered by a method informed by unstructured interviews. This method, instead of structured or semi-structured interviews, lets the participants of the interview form unprepared and intuitive answers that result in a vivid conversation of joint thinking (Leonard & Ambrose 2012). Coheen and Crabtree (2006) acclaim unstructured interviews as a way of trying out an idea while still opening up for new ideas. Unstructured interviews are described as extremely useful when developing a comprehension of not yet fully understood areas and also emphasise the opportunity of forming new understandings during the interview (Coheen & Crabtree 2006).

“Unstructured interviews allow researchers to focus the respondents’ talk on a particular topic of interest, and may allow researchers the opportunity to test out his or her preliminary understanding, while still allowing for ample opportunity for new ways of seeing and understanding to develop.” (Coheen & Crabtree 2006)

To provide the richest possible data, the conversations are recorded and transcribed (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori 2011, p. 534). Besides, recording the conversation was significant in keeping the interaction as natural as possible and leave space for a free flow of thinking. The two conversations were kept individually, over Skype or face-to-face, in

spring 2019. The respondents, Zach Dodson and Arja Karhumaa, are not anonymised in order to fully credit their knowledge and emphasise the value of the material beyond this research. The thesis includes the transcribed versions of the original conversations (see appendix), to encourage further analyses of the material.

While the unstructured conversations are the primary source of data, research writings, blogs and articles are studied to form a more comprehensive understanding of the changing discourse of visual communication design. As a result, the texts in focus are the ones recommended by Dodson and Karhumaa in combination with writings that explore the input of the conversations.

### Improving the existent models

The content analysis of the gathered material examines the premise of implementing a dynamic function to the  $\tau$ -shaped person. The aim is to introduce an improved model adaptable to the presented changes. However, the examination at this stage is only a way of trying out and formulating hypothetical thoughts to be tested and finalised in future research.

A formative methodology intended for design theory is applied to the process of forming the improved model. *The formative research methodology for design theory* is introduced by Charles M. Reigeluth and Theodore W. Frick (1999), and describes how to proceed, step-by-step, in the process of improving and creating design theory. The methodology is intended to be used in developmental research of designing instructional practices or processes (1999, p. 633). The thesis follows the process described, to improve the T-shaped model and reach the aim of the research (see table 1). At this stage, the collecting and revision cycle is repeated only once, as the instance is intended to be exposed to more advanced testing in the future.

**TABLE 1** Formative methodology by Reigeluth and Frick (1999, p.638).

- |  |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1</b> Select a design theory</li> <li><b>2</b> Design an instance of the theory</li> <li><b>3</b> Collect and Analyse formative data on the instance</li> <li><b>4</b> Revise the instance</li> <li><b>5</b> Repeat data collecting and revision cycle</li> <li><b>6</b> Offer tentative revisions for the theory</li> </ol> |
|--|

## 3 RESULT

## Introducing the human-shape

The result of the approached material forms a bricolage of knowledge (see table 2, p. 16), a sort of conceptual montage, of the gathered material (Denzin & Lincoln 2011, p. 5). This montage is a product of multiple perspectives on the research statement and forms a totality of insights expressed in talk, text and visuals. At the first analytical perception of the bricolage, it seems endlessly moving. Similar to the way a digital social feed is constantly updated; the analysis forms a constant flow of openings for new understandings. The perception of a moving result is interpreted as an indication of a valid research statement. Thereby, the dynamic environment of today should not only change the way design looks, but it should also change the way we look at the designer.

Within the bricolage, there are elements of constant development, which causes the result of the analysis to appear moving. In order to make sense of the material within the context of this thesis, the findings are presented as fixed constants. These constants are a result of the analysis, which sifts through the bricolage to find clusters of meaning within the gathered material. *Visual analysis* (Posser 2011, p. 479) in combination with *text* and *conversation analysis* (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori 2011, p. 534) are used simultaneously to reformulate the collected material into information (Leonard & Ambrose 2012, p. 130).

The material is synthesised into connections of significance through reflexive and reflective thinking (Leonard & Ambrose 2012, p. 96 & 129–130), thereafter the clusters are observed by viewing and reviewing the selected models as well as reading and re-reading the transcripts and collected writings (Denzin & Lincoln 2011, p. 5). The detected clusters demonstrates, as clearly as possible, the knowledge relevant to the research. The result is presented and elaborated under the following topics: The complexity of communication, The power of technology and The democratisation of visual communication design.

### The complexity of communication

While communication always has to some extent been relevant to graphic design, the analysis shows that recent changes in the context of communication are pushing the field to further reaction. During our conversation, Zach Dodson brings up the changed relationship between the designer (the one who communicates) and the audience (the ones receiving the message). Over the past century, designers knew their target-audience and could easily tailor the message accordingly. Meanwhile today, with a global broadcasting through various media, the messages we as designers communicate is received by anyone, at any time. In addition, Dodson deliberates on the developing communication context; “the space the messages live in is the internet, this very global village is huge, and you see a lot of mixed messages or messages that offend people”.

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“There is the risk of offending someone or being misunderstood, but I think there is the risk of not being effective or not being heard. You don’t understand who you are speaking to or how the message will be received. Just that problem alone is so complicated now because the receivers could be anybody and everybody, all the time.” (Dodson)

This change is essential to the role of visual communication designers as the design we present is interpreted in multiple cultural contexts, and the same message might be interpreted differently from receiver to receiver. The living space of communication has also brought change to the way design content is formed. Elzbieta T. Kazmierczak (2003) suggests that the content of design is constructed by the receiver, not the designer, indicating that the key to design is related to the ability to generate “the appropriate contextual frame in the receiver for constructing meaning” (Kazmierczak 2003, p. 54).

In conversation with Arja Karhumaa, the constant change of communication is discussed. Karhumaa points out how “it is really obvious that means of communication have drastically changed only in the past ten years, or even five years, and they will continue to do so even in like a faster phase”. The complexity of communication changes the focus of design away from the aesthetic aspects of design towards questions of power and representation.

“I remember working in an ad-agency myself and the most prominent discussion was these cultural differences, what does the colour blue mean in Saudi-Arabia or something, and that discussion was very aesthetics based as well and not related to power or representation.” (Karhumaa)

Also, Karhumaa states that the future of communication should be discussed not only by theorists but amongst designers. If the essential idea of design as communication, is to create the designs as easily interpreted as possible (Redström 2005, p. 126), how does the ever-changing context of communication affect the practice and on the role of the visual communication designer? We should be asking the questions: How do we communicate? What is communicated? Who is communicating and to whom?

“There are other more urgent issues that should be dealt with by design nowadays. I think the most crucial ones are with the communication part.” (Karhumaa)

### The power of technology

As the capacity of the human mind is limited, technology can function as an extension of intelligence (Norman 1993). However, there is a duality to the impact of technology that should be recognised in relation to questions of power and communication. With technology comes power, and as for now, it divides the society into the ones who have access to technology, and those who do not (Norman 1993). Arja Karhumaa points out this division and links it to the issue of representation by identifying this as a crucial issue in the practice of visual communication design.

“How do we communicate to each other as human beings in this sort of globalised, digitalised and the immensely networked world where there are at the same time a large parts of the people within the globe that have none or restricted access to the internet for example. And where other people have more power over others, where a group of people get to represent – or make representations out of people who are not present. How do we take care of that communication? How do we represent – in text and image – different people, in terms of ethnicity or gender or class.” (Karhumaa)

There are also indications of technology adapting to the practice of design and taking over design tasks. In a near future, the aesthetic aspects of design might be replicated by technology, as Karhumaa puts it in words; “and I do think that many of the, what you called beautiful, design objects will be done by machines. Because aesthetic form, and graphic form, typographic form, is already very easy for machines to replicate”. However, this change should not necessarily be regarded as a threat. Instead, the current designer ought to find new ways of practising their knowledge, and stop relying on the circumstances and conventions of the past.

“But now that the previous and traditional tools and technologies do not apply anymore, and the whole working life is so much in change as it is – then the design practice and the design field should react accordingly and take a sort of agency that it has not maybe had before. Whereas before the field has been reactive, we should somehow aim to be proactive – whatever that means.” (Karhumaa)

There is a need for reconsidering the role of the visual communication designer in an environment where form and function are no longer essential to the practice. Karhumaa suggests a proactive approach as a way of, as designers, taking power over the development of visual communication design.

“Who would better to design jobs than designers themselves. I mean we should be able to design jobs for ourselves. And I really think that should be possible, but of course, we need structures for that.” (Karhumaa)

Karhumaa proposes self-initiated practice as one way of being proactive, by showing clients and society new ways of our practice, even though not asked for it; “It has to be constantly shown in practice, that you [the client] can understand ‘wow, this looks

different from this and this'... And this is what happens when things are designed in unconventional ways. Because it is only the conventional that we are asked for”.

#### The democratisation of visual communication design

The technology and globalised communication context of today has democratised the field. As the means of our practice are transferred into technological solutions, they also become attainable for any human or computer to learn and exercise. In Dodson's words “In a way it is great, it is democratic to me, people have access to this design language”. While the practice of the last century also changed with the technology, the educated graphic designers could always rely on the need for their practical skills and their expertise. Today, this reliance is not as evident as the language of visual communication design is democratised.

“Because the tools of design have become easier and easier, or more accessible. The learning curve on Photoshop or InDesign is smaller than it has ever been and it is easier to use. The ton on online tutorials, teenagers teach themselves to use these things. Lots of more people are comfortable using them. You know, [in the past] graphic designers could depend on people needing their knowledges, but now everybody designs their own business cards...” (Dodson)

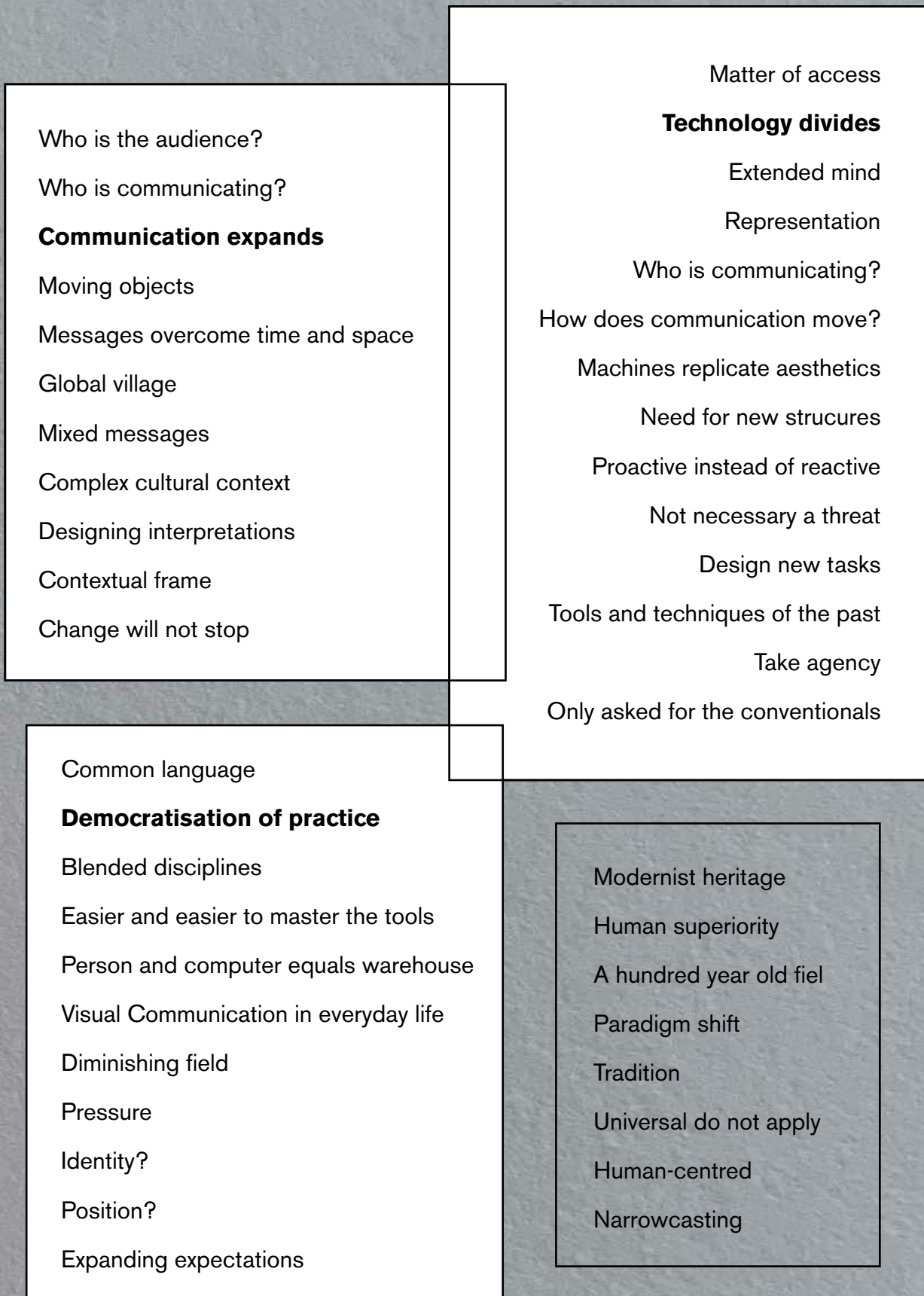
Paradoxically, the field is also diminishing, as many of the tasks of the past are overtaken by technology. The same task that previously was done by a workforce, is today done by a single person with a computer. Hence, the purpose of graphic design is pushed beyond the skills and tasks designers relied upon. The democratised knowledge might be a reason for the field to find its way into other fields. Dodson says; “graphic design as a specific and distinct discipline I think is diminishing. I think it is becoming blended and part of lots of other disciplines”. This change puts pressure on the expectations of the visual communication designer, instead of mastering only one technique, we are expected to know all means of visual communication.

“At least a student – this feels like a lot. Like a lot, a lot, a lot, to grasp and to learn. And I think that the main aim with my thesis is to find a model to, not to lean on, but a model to help you reflect on this fact and to help you gain self-awareness and to help you understand your own identity as a designer in this changing field. While you have to know this kind of stuff and you need your knowledge, you are also still just human in the core.” (Rosvik)

To summarise, there is a need for awareness concerning the prospects of the development ahead. How should visual communication designers respond to the paradoxical future of an expanding amount required knowledge in combination with a diminishing need of the practice? In a way or another, visual communication design as discourse must take conscious steps towards responding to this change. As Karhumaa says; “No one will take care of designers unless they take care of themselves”.



TABLE 2 The bricolage.



### Identifying the gaps

The research statement implies that the current variations of the  $\tau$ -shape are insufficient in accurately reflecting development. In order to examine this implication, the three clusters are compared to the phenomenon of the constantly reshaped  $\tau$ -shape. The comparison is an analytical process to point out how the models succeed and fail in reflecting the change in order to detect overlooked aspects and create new knowledge to incorporate in the improved instance.

When comparing the models to the clusters, the initial  $\tau$ -shape can be considered a response to the development of its time. In the formation of the model, it illustrated a need for solving complex problems from multiple perspectives, something not considered before (Demirkan & Spohrer 2015). In terms of the complexity of communication, the skills of the horizontal bar is frequently described as communicative, and in some descriptions also involves understanding the complexity of the globalised communication context. For instance, the description presented by the  $\tau$ -academy incorporates skills as perspective, networks, critical thinking and global understanding (tsummit.org). However, it is not clear if the skills are intended as a solution to collaborate within a globalised corporate context, or as a way of communicating design to a globalised audience. Overall are the communicative skills of the  $\tau$ -shape more collaborative, proposed to be used within a team or an organisation.

The  $\tau$ -shaped person has also been described as adaptable (Brown 2009), but only within the context of a workplace. There is a possibility of opening up the skills of the  $\tau$ , with the audience in mind, in order to communicate within a complex, global and ever-changing cultural context. The  $\tau$ -shape can also be considered a reaction to the diminishing importance of technical skills and aesthetical skills to design; as it illustrates a need for knowledge in multiple areas in combination with in-depth knowledge. In addition, several of the modified models indicate that there is a need for multiple deep knowledges as well. Consequently, designers strive to add more and more pins to the  $\tau$  in all directions – more knowledges and techniques to master – in the end resulting in a shape that never seems to be enough. While the  $\tau$ -shape has altered a numerous amount of reformations, none of the instances has opened up the model beyond the context of project management. As a result, the dynamic and complex world has caused the constant model to reshape in order to fit the new circumstances (see figures 2–9, p. 8).

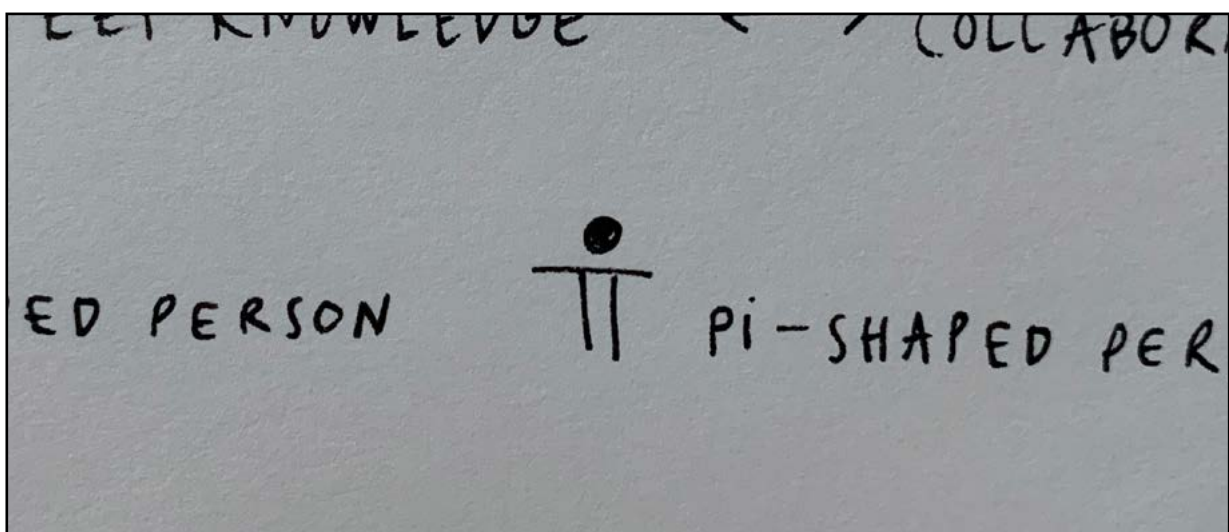
### Forming the human-shaped person

The result shows that the fixed shape does not sufficiently respond to change. In reaction, a dynamic function is added to improve the model. The form of the dynamic function derives from personal intuition. Reigeluth and Frick (1999) point out that several previous theorists have instinctively used the formative methodology in improving design theory (1999, p. 633). Similarly, my initial reformation happened by instinct when first introduced to the  $\tau$ -shaped and  $\pi$ -shaped person, during a lecture by Zach Dodson at Aalto University in fall 2017. At the lecture, I intuitively reshaped the models while taking notes (see figure 11). By adding dots – heads – above the  $\tau$  and the  $\pi$ , the previous models were reshaped into human-shapes (see figure 12).

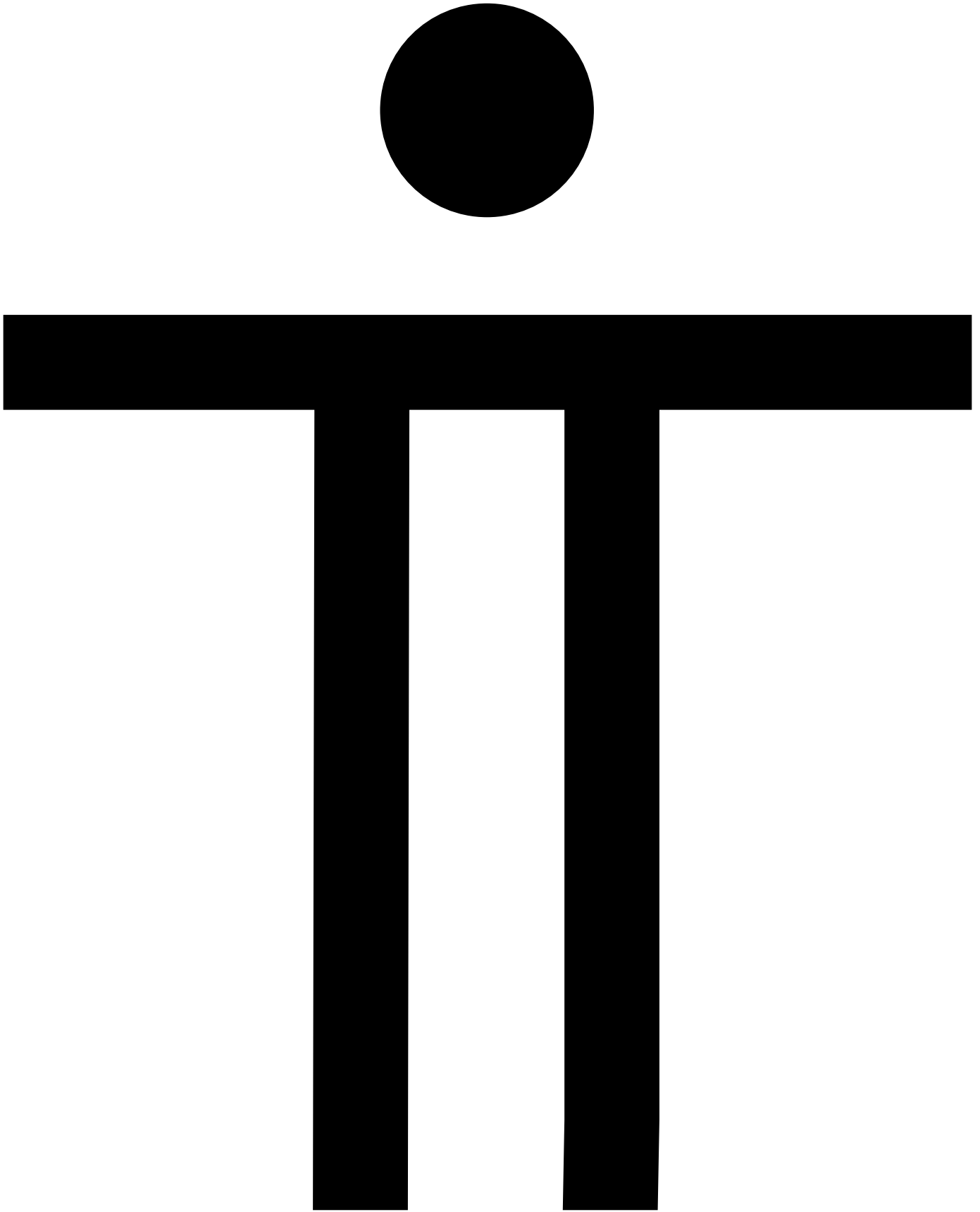
Albert Sznet-Gyorgyi said, “research is to see what everybody else has seen, and to think what nobody else has thought” (Leonard & Ambrose 2012, p. 6). While at the time, the added heads were no more than a visual enhancement in order to remember the shapes, the intuition inspired new thoughts and the idea of exploring the shapes as theory. Therefore, the initial intuition takes place as the first two steps of the formative methodology in this research: first, (1) the T-shape was chosen as the theory to improve, and second (2) a draft is designed by the added head. While intuition is considered valid in the design process (Raami, 2015), the spontaneous approach is debatable from a theoretical perspective. To identify the relevance of the human-shaped person, the instance is formed by applying formative methodology:

- 1 The T-shape selected as design theory to improve
- 2 A draft of the human-shape is designed as an instance of the theory
- 3 Collect and analyse formative data on the instance
- 4 Revise the human-shape
- 5 Repeat data collecting and revision cycle in future research
- 6 A revised form of the human-shape is offered as an alternative for the selected theory

To test the result, the human-shape is analysed in comparison to the identified gaps between the presented result and the existing models. To be a successful improvement of the existing models the model should implement (at least) the three following things: (1) awareness of the complex communication context design is practiced in, (2) incorporate responsibility and a proactive role in relation to the future, and last (3) instead of being forced to reinvent itself constantly, the model should be dynamic to development. As a result, the human-shaped person is presented as a model that implements these aspects; where the head represents the dynamic shape suggested as a solution, and the identified gaps take place as improved theory inside the added dot – the head.



**FIGURE 11** Photography of the intuitive reshaping in notes from lecture 2017.



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**FIGURE 12** The human shaped-person.

## 4 DISCUSSION

# A dot of knowledge

The outcome of this thesis is twofold; (1) The human-shaped person is recognised and discussed as probable and successful improvement of the previous models. In addition, (2) the critical and reflective thoughts in combination with the visual outcome of this thesis are introduced as a contribution to the critical debate of the field. To summarize the outcome, the dual parts are regarded as parallel in comparison to the intention and problem stated in the beginning. The challenges and prospects of the outcome are projected to a variety of contexts to estimate the scenarios of introducing the human-shaped person to the theory and practice of visual communication design. The discussion also addresses identified results of the research, not directly answering the intention of the research or the problem. In addition, possible topics for future research are pointed out.

## The human-shape

In the introduction, this thesis called for a new perspective on the visual communication designer since the dynamic environment of today should not only change the products of design; it should also change the profession. In the research, the  $\tau$ -shaped person is considered the current perception of the role and the human-shape a new perspective. The human-shaped model demonstrates how visual communication designers should utilise and identify their knowledge in relation to a dynamic and expansive environment. In its dynamic nature, the human-shaped person responds to change differently from a  $\tau$ -shaped person; in reaction to constant change, the  $\tau$ -shaped person would aim for an endless expanding of knowledge – chasing more and more vertical bars, or reaching for an even broader horizontal line – in the attempt of keeping up with the development of the field. Instead, the human-shaped person is reflective, aware and interactive with the society it practices in. With the added head, the knowledge and practice of the visual communication designer are dynamic and proactive, instead of forced to be expansive.

However, it is essential to acknowledge that the  $\tau$ -shape and the  $\pi$ -shape are still relevant to the introduced model. The two existing models take place as variations of the body in the human-shape, and the previous concept of the shapes should be recognised in the new model. The previous shapes are relevant in terms of collaboration, an equally important aspect in a changing environment as the dynamic nature. In addition, the human-shaped person implements the skills of the  $\tau$  and  $\pi$  in a wider cultural context than the business framework it has been related to before. As a result, the interdisciplinary skills of the horizontal bar evolves to become integrative; embodying involvedness, inclusiveness and representation as essential to communication and collaboration.

Looking at the industry of visual communication designers, the human-shaped person should also be recognised as a member of a community (see figure 13). The dynamic function of the digital space has formed new kinds of communities, generating knowl-



FIGURE 13 Chart over a dynamic community of human-shapes.

edge by crowdsourcing, co-creation and open innovation (Joutsela & Korhonen 2014). Comparably, the prospects of generating new knowledge amongst human-shaped designers should be recognised. For instance, implementing the model in education would result in a community of future human-shaped designers; a network of aware, proactive and dynamic people who cooperate over disciplines, instead of individually or organisationally striving to be the one who grasps the complex overload of knowledge. Within the complex environment of our practice, a single actor or organisation cannot be held accountable for all activities (Hossain & Uddin 2012). However, a supportive community of human-shaped persons would have the tools and discipline to form dynamic networks of joint knowledge and responsibility.

#### The heritage of modernism

During the analysis, the synthesis of the material generates an insight beyond the initial research approach (see table 2, p. 17) . Besides, the insight might be of importance in order to fully comprehend the prospects of the human-shape and should be deliberated further in future research. Zach Dodson, Arja Karhumaa and other researchers recognise the presence of outdated conventions in the practice and theory of design and points out the fact that visual communication design is currently based on a strong heritage of modernist means.

In relation to the outcome presented in this thesis, the duality of this insight should be recognised. While the practice, theory and also education of visual communication design is to a great extent based on models of the past century (Davis & Hunt 2017, p. 1). This research indicates that the modernist means no longer apply to the current environment in which design is applied. While the heritage should, without doubt, be acknowledged, the risk of relying on the strong heritage of modernism should be recognised as visual communication design moves forward.

This risk can be detected by looking back on the previous century. In retrospect, the past century can be defined as human-centred, in which the power belonged to the human as superiors. Today that superiority is no longer equally evident, as the dominance of humankind is challenged by the verdicts of overdevelopment, digital technology and climate change. The human-shaped per-

“The modernist tradition [...] where we have wanted to make things universal – one function fits all solutions – and those categories don’t fit the contemporary society anymore. And in many ways we are still replicating the modernist way of doing, making, thinking, living, talking.” (Karhumaa)

“Say a hundred of years ago [...] You knew your audience and you knew how to tailor your message and how it would be received. And you still see a lot of that. In some ways, companies seem to be doing – the buzz word is narrowcasting –targeted messages for tiny groups.” (Dodson)

son could be a starting point for future research of this insight; a way of looking at the human objectively, as part of a bigger picture. The objective perspective is a possibility to explore how the human qualities we possess as visual communication designers can be utilised in a society and world beyond ourselves. Furthermore, the human-shaped person could be recognised as an opportunity to step away from the traditional modernist means, and instead explore new ways of defining visual communication design.

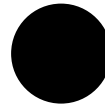
### Discussing the human-shape

As an improved model, the human-shaped person needs to be exposed to more advanced testing and further research in order to be used in practice. The presented qualities of the human-shape are at this stage only formative thoughts and do not derive from well-rounded research. However, the human-shape as model should be regarded as a draft of visual theory to explore further.

In terms of contributing to the critical debate, it is necessary to question the relevance of examining the  $\tau$ -shaped person and variations of it. By its definition, the model is by no means a representation of the profession of the visual communication design. However, as the result of the study is relevant to the debate the  $\tau$ -shape should be considered a valid point of departure, regardless of the initial intention of its purpose. The idea of the human-shape highlights an important question considering the changing field: how do we as humans keep up with a field that is rapidly expanding beyond our knowledge? Entering the human-shaped person to the debate opens up for an crucial humane perspective, especially relevant in terms of identity and position.

While the  $\tau$ -shape visualises the role and knowledge of designers in a simplified way, the human-shape does the exact opposite; it opens up the knowledge of the role as a complex and dynamic matter.

From a semiotic point of view, the human-shape is withholding an enormous amount of symbolic value within one dot (see figure 14). The human-shape makes the model thinking, moving, loving, caring, irrational, personal – and it makes the shape more approachable in self-reflection. Likewise, the added dot integrates one of the most complex existential questions of humankind into the model; what makes us human?



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**FIGURE 14** The dot.



The visual form of the human-shaped model does not only derive from putting a dot over the  $\tau$ . The redesign is a verdict of understanding visual design as a mean of creating knowledge (Drucker 2014) and the historical importance of the human shape. For instance, replicating the human visually can be traced back in history to early cave paintings and figurines; such as the oldest visual representations of woman beauty, which are known to be the *Venus figurines* of the upper Paleolithic period (Dixson & Dixson 2011). In other words, the human shape associates back to the root of creating pictures, long before scripts and before mathematical constants, and has through time represented beauty and knowledge in various ways. Therefore, the added head positions the model to a historical and aesthetical framework, which the  $\tau$  was never part of. While the many variations of letter-shaped models are formulated visually based on functional principles, the human-shaped person embodies aesthetical, semiotic and historical knowledge.

However, the representation of the human-shape also argues against the use of it. While the symbolic value of the human shape makes it attainable and intellectual, it also makes it exceptionally controversial. If taken into use by the public, the human-shape could start to take a more fixed form and might be considered a suggestion of one ideal human shape or a one-sided view of the human.

In terms of cultural context, if interpreted from a pop-cultural perspective where it is taught to see symbols of men and women as they are represented on toilet doors, the human-shape could be viewed as a representation of a man. However, as a skirt is not actually part of women – and the human-shape is not designed to represent any gender or sex – this is not considered an ultimate cause to condemn the use of the shape in this thesis. Nevertheless, it should be recognised that one perspective is not enough in answering the question of representation, and the answer is by consequence left open-ended for others to address in the future.

A diverse representation is reflected by the visual design of the model presented in this thesis, where the human-shape is stretched and illustrated in varying size, and style. As the shape is an abstract form, the different styles are not initially intended as a representation of any actual human individuals or groups, but a representation of the dynamic function of the model. In addition, the option of designing the human-shape as a digital, interactive and dynamic product should be considered and explored in order to capture the essential function and purpose of the model.

### Concluding words

The human-shaped person is a response to the forecast of development. The changes of the twenty-first century are already pushing visual design further away from the traditional craft. How should we as designers and humans respond to this development? In the dynamic space of the internet, we design visual messages to move, interact and react to the active and complex environment in which it is displayed. As the circumstances of our practice is equally dynamic and moving, should we learn from the way we currently design products to respond? In conclusion, this thesis suggests that designers should design their own profession accordingly; incorporating proactive, reflective and inclusive skills, human skills, as fundamental to the practice of visual communication design.

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- 6     **Figure 1** The T-shape.  
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- 9     **Figure 2** The I-shape.  
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- 10    **Figure 10** Chart of the changing view on the T-shaped person.
- 12    **Table 1** Formative methodology by Reigeluth and Frick.
- 17    **Table 2** The Bricolage.
- 19    **Figure 11** Photography of notes from lecture 2017.
- 20    **Figure 12** The human shaped-person.
- 22    **Figure 13** Chart over a dynamic community of human-shapes.
- 24    **Figure 14** The dot.

All visuals designed by Tintin Rosvik.

## In Conversation with Zach Dodson

**TINTIN:** My intention is to have more of a dialog than an interview, but I have prepared some question areas to discuss: First the T-shape, second design thinking, and then lastly the future of the field of graphic design.

**ZACH:** Okay.

[...]

**TINTIN:** As I described in my e-mail, I got the idea [of the human-shape] when you talked about the T-shape and the field of graphic design in change. You used the model as an example on how we could think about ourselves, not using it as the perfect model, but one model. In that moment I got the idea, why not the human-shape? I saw the shape of you on the podium with the T in the background and I just saw a dot – a head – above the T and I saw this new model than then stuck with me. If you could tell me your own interpretation of the T-shape, what does it mean to you.

**ZACH:** Yeah sure, because it is not my idea, it comes from IDEO I think. I don't remember exactly what I said in this lecture but I don't think I presented the T-shape as the way it should be but I put it up as a question, and something to think about and it was interesting to me when I heard about it and I thought it would be worth investigating. And I like your idea of the human-shape, that is exactly the reason why to bring something up to question if it makes sense, could it be better? But yeah the T-shape, that you should know a little bit of a lot of things and then kind of go very deep into one discipline makes a lot more sense than someone who just knows a specific discipline. In that lecture I was kind of taking it further, with the pi-shape, I think it is more interesting if you know deeply about two things and still the context of everything. But I think more importantly than the number of areas you go deep I think that the context bar above is more important. Because of what design is, especially graphic design, is a mode of communication and you want to communicate... Say a hundred of years ago if you wanted to communicate to your village and you wanted to convince them of an idea or tell them a story, you

knew your audience because you lived with them and there where probably forty of them. You knew your audience and you knew how to tailor your message and how it would be received. And you still see a lot of that. In some ways, companies seem to be doing – the buzz word is narrow casting –targeted messages for very small groups. But even if you do that, the space the messages live in is the internet, this very global village is huge and you see a lot of mixed messages or messages that offend people. Because it means something different from one group to the other group. So now I think, if you are going to effectively communicate, even with a small group and really get your message across. Number one it is a lot louder, because there is a lot of people talking. And number two there is this huge global context, this cultural and political context inside of it. If you are not aware of those and have some sense of those I mean, there is the risk of offending someone or being misunderstood but I think there is the risk of not being effective or not being heard. You don't understand who you are speaking to or how the message will be received. Just that problem alone is so complicated now because the receivers could be anybody and everybody, all the time. So yeah, that was why I was arguing for this cultural consumption and cultural awareness and sort of at all levels: I think it is good to know academic theories, I think it is good to know pop-culture too. You need to kind of be flexible enough to at least know a little bit about how things work in Japanese culture and how things work in comic book culture, how do things work in reality-TV. Because these things are in the culture, in the air. And it [graphic design] is essentially a cultural job, you are making culture.

**TINTIN:** Very interesting. When I've done some research on the T-shape a lot of people use the word "communication skills" for the horizontal bar. So I think it is very essential to be able to communicate between different fields and different knowledges, so I think you have the correct interpretation of what this means.

**ZACH:** There is also this idea, I am sure you could find writings or literature on the citizen

designer. That might even come closer to your ideas on the human shaped designer if I understand what you mean. And that is someone who is politically aware and politically active. Political, global, environmental implications of all of the works that they do.

**TINTIN:** Yeah maybe. Even though I have the picture of the human-shape I have not really found the exact meaning for the head – or the representation of it. And I've been thinking of design thinking but feels a bit more... Or when I read about design thinking it is very process based – this kind of strict process explained – while I want the human shape to be something more empathetic and I think design thinking is part of it more maybe not the core of it. And I think the citizen designer might help me get further with my thinking of a value oriented designer. Because values are very important to me when I am designing but then it feels, but the concept of these thought feels very blurry but I hope that the discussions I have will bring some clarity to my idea of the head.

**ZACH:** Yeah good, I think you are searching in the right direction. In the US most undergraduate education is four years of studies, and usually includes this liberal arts base which often is up to two years of courses. Say you were a graphic design student in the US, you might have two years of graphic design and the other two years would be what they call a liberal arts or humanities foundation. And you would take history courses, some language courses and you would be required to take at least one science course, at least one philosophy course, and one literature course. Kind of like this wide sampling of the humanities and the idea behind that is to be an educated and fully rounded human that you should have all of this information and all of these contexts. And I agree with that system, of course I came through that system and been indoctrinated into that way of thinking, but I did find in Europe when you get to the university that it is much more focused on the specific discipline. And I mean there is arguments for that too I and think in Finland especially before university you get a much broader and high quality education than in the US for exam-

ple. But yeah, if I were you, I mean of course if you are a better human – who knows what better means – but you know more rounded, culturally aware, I think of course I think if you are a better human you will be a better designer right but I think you should draw a line somewhere between what do you need to be a really good designer and what is just being a good person. Of course it is great if you come out and say, everybody should be totally educated and aware and great – well yea – I gave that lecture in the context of design education, what should we teach and what you should study. And I think if you try and draw that line it will be a fuzzy line. When you start reading about citizen design, well of course it is good to be a good citizen, but do you NEED to be a good citizen to be a good designer – I don't know. Maybe, it depends. But I think that is an important line to draw, otherwise you might say generalized things that moves further and further away from design.

**TINTIN:** Yea, and that is why I studied the T-shaped model and tried to understand it. And what I got from it was that the T-shape is just focusing on design as doing. It might represent skills as coding or illustrating – and it focuses on only the practical skill, and what is you understand of other practical skills. The thinking of design and how you think as designer is not implemented in the model. That is why I wanted to apply design thinking to the human shape, but when I started to read about it was not the same thing that I thought it would be. Do you have any recommendations on how to proceed? Do you know, is there any research about the thinking part of design?

**ZACH:** Well you know it is funny that you mention this. Design thinking is this kind of huge buzz word and you know, if I'm guessing what you found when you dug into it was this really kind of detailed and strict process.

**TINTIN:** Yes, doing problem solving by design.

**ZACH:** And this has never been very useful for me, I have never used this kind of process. And part of is that these kind of processes where not around when I was around. By the time they came I had a good grasp of what works for me and I

just did it according to my instinct. But they strike me as very good for someone with like an engineering mind, do you know what I mean? There are designers who have that kind of engineering mind-set, but I think there are also designers who have a much more artistic mind and drive their visual solution through intuition and instinct and aesthetic. Intuition can be just another word for kind of deep knowledge, it feels like you have an instinct that it should look this way but unconsciously you did a million posters and you have this knowledge somewhere and that's why you know that it looks cool if you did it this way. There was a thesis, a PhD thesis, about intuition and how intuition played into design specifically and that might be interesting. That might be what you are after. They say design thinking and then they give you a process where you just follow the steps – there is no thinking there!

**TINTIN:** I was so disappointed, when you have this wonderful term “design thinking”. When I found it I was like, yes this is the thing I've been searching for – this is the head. But then when I looked into it, it was nothing about the design process, this kind of knowledge and what is actually happening in your head. The design thinking process as it is now is not within your head it is more something that you use from outside and just follow. Intuition and instinct are more interesting as human words, since they are human qualities.

**ZACH:** And they are artistic, they are not exactly defined. Let me see if I have a copy of it... I do have a copy of it! The thesis is called “Intuition unleashed”. It was a few years ago a doctoral thesis by Asta Raami. I am sure you can find it in the library.

**TINTIN:** Perfect, thank you so much. This puts words to what I am trying to find.

**ZACH:** Yea you might end up leaving the phrase design thinking term, because it is ruined by people.

**TINTIN:** Yea unfortunately, because I think it is kind of a beautiful linguistic term in a way. For me it could describe something totally different than what it is now. But hopefully I can either reclaim

the term design thinking or then go with something else, which might be smarter.

**ZACH:** Well yea, you could redefine the term.

**TINTIN:** Lastly, I would like to talk to you about the changes of the graphic design field. What kind of changes do you think are happening now that will have an impact on the future?

**ZACH:** I think that graphic design – and this could be just the perspective of an older person who has been in the university too long – but graphic design as a specific and distinct discipline I think is diminishing. I think it is becoming blended and part of lots of other disciplines. And that has been happening in some ways for a long time, to layout a book or a magazine that used to take a full warehouse of people. One person to typeset, one person to cut out, one person who photographed, another person to put them in this machine. And the designer was this one person who arranged the page, but lots of people and lots of specific specialized jobs. And of course when the computers came those went away and continued to go away more and more and you can quite do the whole magazine by yourself now. But I think it is continuing to go in that direction and the direction of like now you might write the magazine as well as design it and you might start as the writer and then design it yourself. Because the tools of design have become easier and easier, or more accessible. The learning curve on Photoshop or InDesign is smaller than it has ever been and it is easier to use. The ton on online tutorials, teenagers teach themselves to use these things. Lots of more people are comfortable using them. You know, [in the past] graphic designers could depend on people needing their knowledges, but now everybody designs their own business cards, except for a big company maybe who has somebody who designs them.

**TINTIN:** Yea and that's more of a question of wanting it to be that way than needing it to be that way.

**ZACH:** Exactly, so there is not jobs for a bunch of people to design a bunch of business cards because it gets easier. In a way it is great, it is democratic to me, people have access to this design lan-

guage – because I think of it as a language – and if I take that analogy further, if visual communication is like writing, which it is, it’s just a mode of communication, right? And I think we are moving more and more, with the internet towards visuals and towards moving images, and more people are able to speak in that language. And with written language they teach it in school, and almost everybody uses it every day no matter what your job is. You write an e-mail; you are communication with words. But then there is only a very few, specialized professions where writing is the main or only thing that you do. If you are a journalist, if you write novels, if you are an academic – writing is the thing you do. So I think design will be like that. A lot of people will use it a little bit as part of their jobs. Part of your job might be doing the Instagram fee, and then you need to understand the visuals to make it successful and people do. And people use visuals to communicate so it is already happening. But I think it will be more and more specialized, people who just do only that as part of their profession. And in the meantime I think graphic design is blending in more and more with motion design and interactive design. Because all this communication is happening on the computers and screens which move, make sound and are interactive, and the field just naturally steer that way. You see the illustration field for example, if you illustrate something for the New York Times, now they want a moving version for their website. So I think that is the other thing that I see when I look down the road: more motion, more interactivity, and just kind of blending with other design fields. You make a product, you design the product and the packaging and the logo and the it is all kind of one thing.

**TINTIN:** Yes exactly, and – at least a student – this feels like a lot. Like a lot a lot a lot to grasp and to learn. And I think that the main aim with my thesis is to find a model to, not to lean on, but a model to help you reflect on this fact and to help you gain self-awareness and to help you understand your own identity as a designer in this changing field. While you have to know this kind of stuff and you need your knowledge, you

are also still just human in the core. I don’t know if it is possible to reach this result but I hope my thinking will go in that direction.

**ZACH:** Yea, you know when I suggested this Pi-shaped thing I think is too about... There is something for me, design feels like content agnostic. The way that it is talked about within the design field, people don’t talk a lot about the content. The way that I’ve been successful, well Stefan Sagmeister is a good example of this – because he kind of blends design with what I think is art gestures and conceptual pieces that goes into galleries and people talk about. He kind of plays it both ways, to the design world he is doing these interesting visual art things so designers think he is interesting and to the art world he says “oh I am a designer” and they go “that is interesting, what is different about being a designer” – so he is kind of both and he plays it off each other. I’ve done the same thing with writing and design, so I get asked to speak at a writings conference and they think “this is so interesting, how does design fit into writing” and they find me interesting because of that. And when I go to a design conference I say “let’s talk about writing and the content” and they go like “oh, we don’t know about that”, and for them that is interesting. So that is kind of the pi-shaped thing, you find two areas that play off each other. I think that it is a model for being a successful designer right now and my design students here are into surfing and if you get deep into the world of surfing you are going to be the best designer of surf boards and wet suits and whatever surfers need. And the reason is that you know design really well, but you know surfing well too. I always encourage students to take the opportunity to start to investigate other stuff and other interests that you are cooking on at the same time. I think you can even see this in companies, a company like IDEO that used to be a company that would hire an advertising agency, and they would hire a designer to do the design. For example, an energy drink, and the designer would design the logo of an energy drink. Then those design agencies started to say to the company “well, your logo or your packaging for your energy drink



is fine – but your brand message is wrong, your marketing is of, your ads are not good. We need to think about the whole visual package and the way you relate to consumers”. Now you see marketing agencies replace advertising agencies entirely, and it is a lot of the same activity but it is kind of expanded. And now, IDEO is a good example of this, you have these agencies who are like “well, your logo and packaging is good. The brand identity is good. But you drink tastes bad so we need to fix the product too”. So design is creeping it’s down to the bottom of the thing, which I think is great and the way it should be. But then I think at some point that it required the designer to know about the chemical compound of energy drinks and something that is unrelated, that you probably have to go deep on to be successful.

**TINTIN:** I think that is why the term design thinking came up, because the other people within the company which were also part of the process needed to understand the steps they are going through. So design thinking is not a way of explaining the concept to themselves but to other people that needed to understand the concept, since design became a mean for problem solving and not a way of making things look nice. And the problem solving in itself is very interesting I think, but then it doesn’t reflect on who you as designer feel and work. It is just explaining how my design process works to others. So I would like to find a way of defining this new way of designing from the designer’s perspective as well.

**ZACH:** Yes, I think you are right that design thinking explains design to business people and engineers. And in a way it is great that it is a buzz word and it is opening up the businesses and processes, and I credit apple a lot in doing that. Apple really brought design into every part of what they did and it way really successful and then a lot of other companies where like “oh, if we use design and listen to the designers – maybe we will make more money”. But yeah, what is that human part? In my own designing, what I care the most about is my own books and designing for myself. That is my personal, artistic expression. And then it gets into a being and artist or being a writer where you

are expressing something that is emotional and that you care about deeply. And I am very much interested in that kind of design, as opposed to client service design. And of course you can become emotionally attached to a client’s product but for me the most satisfying design is that stuff.

**TINTIN:** We will have to wrap this up soon, but I just want to say still that I’ve been in between deciding on if the human-shape is the designer herself/himself or is it the receiver of design [human-centred design]. But I think it is more interesting to explore the designer in itself, or maybe it could be both but it feels too wide. We’ll see where it goes.

**ZACH:** It is an interesting thing worth looking at. I’ve seen a lot of design students in ten years, and you can see them slowly realizing that design is serving clients, you are there to work the machine and to produce whatever their vision is. And often when you are a junior designer nobody is interested in your ideas or the way you think, they want you to push the buttons and you to make their thing look cool. But so many students come to design who are essentially are artistically minded who were drawn to design because of the aesthetic and the meaning that it held for them and they want to express their own meaning the same way that they got impacted by design. I am sure some students come to the field looking for a job, to make money and serve some big client.

**TINTIN:** Sure, but there are very few – at least what I have experienced at Aalto – who want to be a part of a line who just push the buttons. It is frustrating to realize that it is the future after school.

**ZACH:** Yes, most design students are, what I really would describe best as, artists who want to express something culturally. I wish the profession as a whole had more awareness of that.

Zach Dodson is currently Assistant Professor in Graphic Design at Victoria University of Wellington. Conversation kept 6.2.2019 for 38.07 minutes, over skype.

## In conversation with Arja Karhumaa

**TINTIN:** I got this idea when Zach talked about future changes of our education and in a way I think education is a reflection of what the future might be, so that is why I wanted to speak to you as the head of our program [Visual Communication design at Aalto University], and to hear your thoughts about the future of our field. I aim for this to be more of a dialog than an interview, and my method is unstructured dialog so we have this kind of free flow of thinking.

**ARJA:** Yes, open ended questions.

**TINTIN:** Exactly.

**ARJA:** I think that those are all that we have when talking about the future.

**TINTIN:** Yes of course, and also a bit – and also when forming graphic design theory, it is quite hard to find hard proof on what works. So yes, this is the method I will use. I have however prepared three question areas for us to discuss: First, graphic designer skills beyond practical skills, or the graphic designer skills that you know of beyond practical skills – what skills we might need in addition in to making beautiful content. Second, I would like to talk about your interpretation of design thinking. Third, the future of our field.

[...]

**TINTIN:** In your opinion, do we have any skills beyond the practical and technical skills that we need in our field and in our profession?

**ARJA:** I guess the framework is in the forward looking and in the future?

**TINTIN:** Yes, but you can also think about the moment, for example within our education – do you teach these kinds of skills, for example critical thinking.

**ARJA:** Of course there is always defining what we define as skills and is thinking a skill, is ideas skills, or are attitude skills? But in general your question already implies that the practical skills are there, and those you need to have. Ok, let's agree it is like that. But I think there is already within those practical skills, there is some knowledge that should maybe be harnessed in a more articulated way to become a sort of extended skill,

if you know what I mean. For example, what I mean by this is that in the graphic design education, or practice, or tradition that is has for about a hundred years now, the practice is very skill based. And skill based is about technology, and it is about mastering your tools and of course the aesthetic form has had to do with that as well. And I think the field has sort of is mature enough, that it has been going on long enough and the extent and amount of it is so large by this time – a hundred years – that we have reached a point of maturation where the design field is ready to unfold and look at itself.

**TINTIN:** Yes, I agree on that and I have tried to find this outside perspective beyond the graphic design bubble, because there has not been the possibility of looking at it from afar when it was still in the making. But I hope we are now in a position where we can start to look at it from a zoomed out perspective, I guess.

**ARJA:** Definitely, I agree. And that of course, in most cases if you think about other fields, in most cases that happens by forming theory and concepts about what that knowledge might then be. And I think in this unfolding, starting to conceptualize or theorize practices, you sort of get into very big questions, basically epistemological questions. Which means that what we think of as knowledge in the site in general and whether this type of practice that we have done for a hundred years is considered as knowledge or as something that produce knowledge. We are sort of in a maturation point in that as well, and I think that in several domains, knowledge domains let say that it science or journalism or even like law or medicine, the share amount of data, information and text that is there because of the digitalization has to be visualized in order for us to access them and understand them and there I see sort of point of entry for us as field. And I talk about the graphic design, or visual communication design, field in general. To define what is the specific epistemology, what is the specific knowledge, that we have are unfolding at the moment. But then if I try to go back a few steps to more practical things, about the skills, I was just – I don't know if you read the latest issue of the

*Grafia* magazine, because I was interviewed along with other representatives of educators in our field exactly about this. Well, the point of education and the qualities of future designers. And I gave the same, or tried to give the same sort of points, there that one of the skills – because I think skills where what you were asking for.

**TINTIN:** Yes, but skills, qualities, attributes – it has been hard finding the right word for it so you can use whatever suits best.

**ARJA:** One of the issues that should be addressed is that the designers should gain more agency in what they do. And what I mean by that is that graphic design has been by tradition a reactive field, where we typically have a client or collaborator who comes to us a designer – and we react to that. And we have been really good at it for a hundred years, and it have been working quite nicely apart from then ethical discussion or who's assignment is more valuable from another or harmful. But now that the previous and traditional tools and technologies don't apply anymore, and the whole working life is so much in change as it is – then the design practice and the design field should react accordingly and take a sort of agency that it hasn't maybe had before. Whereas before the field has been reactive, we should somehow aim to be proactive – whatever that means. Whereas now I find that many designers – especially students – struggle in understanding where they will end up working, and at the moment there are, still in the contemporary field the places, the actual chairs in the working life that are available to designers are still quite traditional. So whatever we in education we are trying to establish and terms of this so called agency is not happening in the field yet, but only weak signals of it. And of course there has always been, for example a tradition of entrepreneurship, like independent studios.

**TINTIN:** But I also think that there is a need for employments the wants of the students. We have several times [during our studies] we have gotten the question from agencies and alumni: “why aren't you applying to our jobs?”. But I guess [the answer is that] we don't see ourselves doing the

kind of work that they offer. So I hope that this will be recognized, that there is a clash between what design students want to do and the jobs that are offered. Because as junior designers we get that we have to do these jobs that aren't exactly what we want to do but the jobs [that are offered now] are not even in the right direction.

**ARJA:** Yeah, I totally understand that. And that is why I think it is very important to support designers in any kind of state in their careers to do self-initiated work, because that is one way of establishing proactive practices. But then becomes the next question of, who, or what kind of institutions or actors, will that kind of change be attributed to? Because the designers can't do it by themselves, it can't be up to the individual designer or the individual collectives. But rather, the structures need to be changed. For example, there is examples of these countries where graphic design is more established and stronger – especially in central Europe like the Netherlands or Switzerland – where designers, and especially graphic design, have been heavily funded by the government in different ways. And a lot of designers have been able to do self-initiated work that has been funded in one way or another.

**TINTIN:** So it goes more towards the arts field?

**ARJA:** Yes, it might go more towards the arts. Also in Switzerland – I was just there last week, in Zurich – and I was very impressed that the they had this very strong [...] practice. So it is not really, I think maybe in Netherlands I think they are more towards art and critical practice but in Switzerland the self-initiated practice seem to be a lot about an editorial practice where they do a lot of publishing and the designers are very much involved in creating and curating content for different kinds of publications. And that is one kind of agency that you can take as a designer. And of course those kinds of practices have been there for decades. There are many examples internationally of designers that might do half of their practice with self-initiated and the other half as collaborations or any kind of combination of those. But I think, the Nordic and Scandinavian countries are so peripheral and so small, especially Finland

– well the other ones are small as well, that the field is very small as well. That has kept both the practice and the education quite practical and you just need to educate people to do the craft.

**TINTIN:** Yes, because that was the center of the profession, and that what was needed – especially in the time before computers. Talking about that, you mentioned that part of creating beautiful or aesthetically pleasing content – graphic design – you need other skills as well. Or maybe I didn't understand you correctly. But do we need thinking and knowledge in addition to our practical skills to be able to create beautiful designs? And if so, do you think technology might be able to create the design as we do now? Or is a human needed in the creation of graphic design? Is there a difference in design created by technology and human?

**ARJA:** To me, the essence of graphic design is communication. And that is largely, like of course, the majority of that is communication between people. Of course we communicate with machines too and other living beings than humans, but design is involved in communication between people. So communication is really the one starting point, where I start to look at our practice. So I think the questions are – and now I'm really thinking aloud – but the questions for the future is how do we communicate in the future and what needs to be discussed around those speculative ways of communication in the future. It is really obvious that means of communication have drastically changed only in the past ten years, or even five years, and they will continue to do so even in like a faster phase. And I do think that many of the – what you called – beautiful design objects, they will be done by machines. Because aesthetic form, and graphic form, typographic form, is very easy already for machines to replicate.

**TINTIN:** And especially the graphic design that is considered beautiful by the larger public, since “what we often see we find beautiful”, and the that kind of replication is easy for machines to do.

**ARJA:** And it is only aesthetics, form has also to do with function of course – so when you think about not only aesthetics but also recognizable things like genres. Designers had to be very aware

of different genres of layout for example previously, or things visual identities communicate. But those have been evolved into so recognizable genres already that those can be replicated by machines as well and may do so even more precisely.

**TINTIN:** And even they can, maybe, generate these kind of changing visual identities that always is the correct one, always is the resonating best with the public.

**ARJA:** Yes, so I would – especially after coming home from Switzerland on Saturday I find myself being almost nostalgic there because they have such a strong poster culture still, they have a lot of beautiful typographic posters that is very typical of what we think of canonical, essential graphic design tradition, the Swiss style. It is beautiful to look at, at the same time I feel really nostalgic because I feel like personally that is gone, it is not relevant anymore. And me being educated in the 90s, the end of 90s, when that and then the deconstructive style – which was really about aesthetics as well – were prominent. It is really like ambivalent for me to recognize that I have to give up something that has been a core part of my field. But that is because I feel that there are other more urgent issues that should be dealt with by design nowadays. I think the most crucial ones are with the communication part, how do we communicate to each other as human beings in this sort of globalized, digitalized and immensely networked world where there are at the same time a large parts of the people within the globe that have none or restricted access to internet for example. And where other people have more power over others, where a group of people get to represent – or make representations out of people who are not present. How do we take care of that communication? How do we represent – in text and in image – different people, in terms of ethnicity or gender or class. Even class issues are very relevant today, even if they are a bit unfashionable since there is so much talk about gender and ethnicity.

**TINTIN:** Yea but all should be considered. And when I talked with Zach Dodson he mentioned that we are still using the same means of communication as when we knew our target audience.

Which we don't know today. And there is a big issue in – or a danger even – in communication to this global audience where the message can be interpreted in various different ways. How should we communicate in this time, is a very urgent discussion topic.

**ARJA:** And it has grown so much more complicated than, I don't know fifteen years ago when I worked or twenty years ago when Finnish companies started to work within an international context and when visual identity and branding became a thing. And companies started – for example Nokia started – to do international campaigns. I remember working in an ad-agency myself and the most prominent discussion was these cultural differences, what does the colour blue mean in Saudi-Arabia or something, and that discussion was very aesthetics based as well and not related to power or representation. I think the issue of representation is one of the most crucial ones at the moment because that is what communication – as you said, and you discussed with Zach – that it is global at the moment, but when it is put into words or into pictures there is always an element of who is that is talking, and who are you talking to and through who's eyes are the photos taken or illustrations done. So there is a great power in visual communication that needs to be addressed not only by theoreticians and cultural analyst, but also by the designers themselves.

**TINTIN:** Absolutely. Because there are these kinds of theories and maybe research on these topics from this kind of outside perspective, but we don't have these kinds of means as graphic designers to understand this issue.

**ARJA:** And that is largely because of the, at least in my view, the tradition and the modernist tradition of making things universal and this tradition has unified in many aspects of the society and visual communication is one of them, where we have wanted to make things universal – one function fits all solutions – and those categories don't fit the contemporary society anymore. And in many ways we are still replicating the modernist way of doing, making, thinking, living, talking.

**TINTIN:** Yea, I saw this quote – it bugs me that I

didn't save it – but in my mind it's something like “we need to stop idealizing the modernist men of the last century” because that kind of mind doesn't work with the society anymore. And we need to start finding new ways of thinking. In my thesis I try to find what the head of the T-shape, now the human-shape, might be. And the first term that I encountered was design thinking. But when looking into design thinking as phenomenon it doesn't represent the idea I have in mind. I guess I would like you to start with giving your own interpretation of the term, what does design thinking mean to you?

**ARJA:** I think design thinking is quite an established pair of words already. And something that have been very useful in explaining, to fields outside design, some aspects of the epistemology of design. So, to me it is a way of explaining to non-designers, typical processes or typical models how design works and how design processes are conducted. But kind of phases they may have, and what kind of projects are available within those processes. And it has been very useful, in “selling” design to clients or to any other fields like...

**TINTIN:** Engineering?

**ARJA:** Yea typically engineering or some policy making. It has been largely applied in service design and I think it has been very useful in those areas for example. But then, the drawback – to me at least – is as designer it over simplifies quite a lot of the multiply of what design does and how designers think. So paradoxically, design thinking doesn't cover design thinking.

**TINTIN:** Unfortunately no, that is the result I came to as well after a bit of reading and researching. Because in my mind design thinking is a very good term if it wouldn't have been ruined. Because it is a beautiful pairing of words. I share this view of design thinking being explaining the practice to someone outside the field, but if you would explain design thinking within our own field and explain how the designer thinks – what kind of terms would you use? What do you think is going on within our head?

**ARJA:** Have you read Nigel Cross at all?

**TINTIN:** No.

**ARJA:** I think Nigel Cross is largely... he has been criticized maybe and people have written about what he has written about after him, but I think he was one of the first ones in the end of the 80s maybe, when he used the term design-erly knowledge. And he tried to somehow, well basically he tried to do what you are trying to do and what we all are trying to do, somehow articulate what we as designers know that other fields don't. And he compared it to other big groups and domains of knowledge – the scientific domain and the humanities – and to somehow distinguish that from those. And the main issue that he wrote about then, and that has been discussed quite a lot afterwards, is that the knowledge of the designer is material. The designer works with the material world and that their vocabulary is... that they understand materiality as present in the world and they also translate ideas into that world. Because they have a very distinct and precise understanding of the differences in materiality. And that of course is very easy to understand if you talk about an industrial designer, they all know what this and this and this material does and how they work in different context. But it is also as applicable to graphic design, where the materiality is just, maybe a bit more precise. Like typography is material, because it is language and text is material. Because there is no language without a material platform of some kind. So, in that sense, to me that has been one of the key elements in understanding what is special about design and graphic design as well. I give you an example, my teacher Tapani Artomaa told me in school, in class, that a graphic designer should be able to work during an electric break. But then I think he forgot something quite crucial, that the designer is always... there is no design without tools and without technology. You can't design anything in your head and that is always already material. But then there has to be more articulation and more precise thinking and more categorization of what those materials are in respective design fields. And then to come back the elusive point about epistemology again, when we think about what the specific thinking and materiality

in graphic design might be I have how Johanna Drucker's book *Graphesis* quite useful, because she traces history of visualization for several hundred years. First how people have visualized anything to the last two hundred years on how people have tried theorizing the visualization. And that has a certain history and she tries to make it visible so that we would understand that visualizing is not only presenting, it also creates knowledge as well. That is a tricky one, because as long as you just write about it and talk about it, it is very hard for someone outside design to understand. It has to be constantly shown in practice, that you can understand wow "this looks different from this and this". And if it is visualized in different ways it also creates knowledge. So i think there is a... this is where I think the sort of self-initiated practices come along. If there are no places to show these kinds of things, these impacts that design can have, then the designer would have to ideally have space and place to do these kinds of projects so we can show that we can do this as well and this is what happens when things are designed in unconventional ways. Because it is only the conventional that we are asked for. So we have to be proactive in showing things we are not asked for, and that way making it prominent on how the epistemology [of our field] actually works. If that makes sense?

**TINTIN:** Yes absolutely. And also connects back to the fact that we need to be able to do this since technologies and also the ones that aren't educated graphic designers – as the means of graphic design can be taught by anyone – so we need to kind of establish a new role for ourselves in everything to have a meaningful place to work in the future. Otherwise the competition is too large and we are overeducated...

**ARJA:** I might be a terrible idealist, but think that there must be... Who would better to design jobs than designers themselves. I mean we should be able to design jobs for ourselves. And I really think that should be possible, but of course we need structures for that. And it is really like practical stuff, well pragmatically what do you need for self-initiated practice? You need funding, how

do you get funding for things that does not exist yet? Must public funding in Finland is for art for understandable reasons, and of course there is also the very boring question of what is design and what is art? But when you think about communication, and I think design is about communication and information and there is a slight difference and I think it does something alongside with art that maybe art can't do, or isn't even interested in, but is still very necessary for the society nevertheless. So, what should be then done is start hammering the funders with applications for design projects because, as of now, they don't know they exist. Because there is no one doing them. That is how funders understand that this is a thing and this need needs to be funded, and then they will start to create structures – slowly but surely and hopefully. And we have already for example in our program, we have had this design as critical practice course for several years, where we have at least tried to think about these self-initiated practices with student. And tried to think what would be the ways of visual communicators to self-initiate practices, and we asked the student to do their assignment and plan for a practice and write it down as a funding proposal with the secret hope that at least some of them would send them off to the funders and slowly but steadily there would be a growing need for visibility for those kinds of things.

**TINTIN:** Yea, we already touched upon – or quite a lot – on the future of the field. Do you have anything else to add, what do you think waits ahead.

**ARJA:** I don't know, I think the biggest question is how work is organized in general in the future. Whether there is a... what is the working life, that we call now, in ten years or twenty years. Nobody knows but it is certainly not as it is today. So how do we prepare for that, at least for a shorter time frame. The thing that I would be concerned of is the dynamics of workplaces. We already know now that in the recent years some of the workplaces, typically in publishing has decreased enormously, and that would probably continue. The amount of designers has probably not decreased at all; it is just that the persons

previously employed are now employed by themselves. And that, those precarious situations seem to be more common and they will – according to most prognosis – they will continue to be more common. That designers are forced to work alone or forced into entrepreneurship. And that is a situation that we have to look beyond the designer and the design practice. How do we as designers come together in a way we haven't maybe before? When you think about these situations where we have these precarious workers with potentially very poor social securities. Whether you are a freelancer or entrepreneur you don't necessarily know and you don't even know what you are. In that situation it is not sustainable anymore to keep up the atmosphere that has been going on within the design field for many years, where designers and design agencies actually compete with each other and they are regarded as competitors of the same field. And that we rarely share any practices really, because you don't want to give it up to the competitor. But in a situation where it is like a jungle it would be a crucial skill to come together and see the benefit of that. If everyone is precarious on their own maybe it wouldn't be so precarious when they work together and form networks rather than agencies and make choices within their career for example that are aware of the effects of what you do to your colleagues. So those kinds of think are more important than aesthetical or even technological concerns, because those will take care of themselves more or less. But no one will take care of designers unless they take care of themselves.

**TINTIN:** There is a great danger in inheriting the competitive nature of the agencies to an individual level. Because we will just in the end work ourselves to death if everyone is pushing a bit further and a bit further. So it is very important that this change is acknowledged in working by ourselves and finding the good in coming together.

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