

**By way of a foreword:**

**“Alice is in wonderland.” Discuss.**

Mike Press

Down the rabbit hole

*Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, ‘and what is the use of a book,’ thought Alice ‘without pictures or conversation?’*

*So she was considering in her own mind whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies, when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her.*

*There was nothing so VERY remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so VERY much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, ‘Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!’ (when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the Rabbit actually TOOK A WATCH OUT OF ITS WAISTCOAT-POCKET, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and fortunately was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.*

*In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.*

Lewis Carroll - Alice in Wonderland

This is both an exciting and a highly challenging time to be a research student in art and design. Exciting, because to an extent we are able to invent and explore new methods and approaches to research that are directly relevant to our disciplines. Methodologies that locate reflective practice at the heart of our inquiries, quite literally enable us to create books with pictures and conversations. Often those conversations enable us to reach out from our core disciplines to other specialisms, thereby providing opportunities for multi-disciplinary research. Challenging,

because much of this research territory is relatively uncharted. It is easy to get lost down a rabbit hole.

To successfully confront the challenges, to exploit the opportunities and to enjoy the excitement - the very real excitement - that pursuing a research degree presents you with, requires three things: passion, self-confidence and method.

You - the student - bring the passion. Without passion, without a very real hunger for knowledge and discovery, research cannot happen. We are driven by our sense of wonder, to ask questions and seek their answers, and the research degree provides us with our wonderland. If we lose that sense of wonder - that relentless search for truth and beauty - then the whole enterprise becomes pointless. So the critical thing is to nurture your creative vision, self-critical thinking and passion for your research.

But every wonderland of research presents us with the odd Mad Hatter and potions of criticism that can make us feel very small indeed. Which is where self-confidence and belief in the integrity of our inquiry becomes essential. This is perhaps especially the case in art and design when at times we cross over into other disciplines. "Pretty work," I heard a social scientist say to a PhD student in jewellery, "but I fail to see how this extends our knowledge of human communication."

If art and design research is to demonstrate its unique contribution, then it is incumbent on all of us who practice it to clearly and patiently argue its virtues and value. We should not do this defensively, but assertively from a position of self-belief and confidence. The priority of your research supervisors is to strengthen your confidence and to work with you supportively through those times when it can become severely tested.

So, you bring the passion, your supervisors build your confidence - and this book provides an essential and unique guide to the methods.

Carole Gray and Julian Malins are experienced research degree supervisors in art and design at Grays School of Art in Aberdeen. For over a decade they have been pioneering new methodologies that place creative practice at the centre of the research process. Their distinctive contribution has been to refine ways in which creative art and design practices become research methodologies themselves, exploring and mapping research territories and providing sources for knowledge that can only ever be gained through such practice. Furthermore they have worked with their students in developing visual tools and techniques that both define research questions and communicate outcomes. The use of multimedia as a research tool and means of rendering transparent the dynamic processes of creative practice that drive the research agenda, has also been championed by students and staff at Grays.

The “Grays Approach” to research in art and design has inspired and informed many others, including myself. Most importantly it has resulted in real examples of practice-centred research across diverse areas of inquiry, which have led a cultural and methodological shift in art and design research. This shift has not been without its critics, some of whom have argued - rightly - that the lack of methodological guidance and rigor in practice-centred research can at times lead to inquiries of questionable merit.

You have fallen down a rabbit hole of wonder. To journey through it with any sense of purpose and direction what you really need is some sort of map. There are a number of excellent books that can guide you in terms of methodologies in the social and natural sciences, and some which are of great value in analysing visual material, but to date there has been no text to guide students through those methodologies most directly relevant to research in art and design.

Visualising Research provides such a guide, drawing on the experience of a world class supervisory team, and some pioneering examples of doctoral research. The book takes you on a journey through the research process, helping you to draw your own map, negotiate the challenges of your studies and reach a meaningful, fulfilling destination. This book is certainly not the only one you will need in supporting your research, but my expectation is that it will be a constant companion in the challenging journey ahead of you; providing advice, posing questions and presenting possibilities.

In particular the book will help you to make sense of your broad area of interest and frame a question that can focus your work and thinking. Ultimately it will help you to make that “original contribution to knowledge” expected of research students in any discipline.

At the very outset of a research degree, this objective can feel somewhat daunting. But as you will discover, being original is easy. Making a difference to the world with art and design - that is the real challenge and, I would argue, should be your over-riding mission. Here’s a short story for you:

Once upon a time there was a man who owned only three jackets and two ties. According to one account: “he is an unlikely looking hero, with bottle-lensed spectacles straight from the ‘boffin’ drawer in central casting and the ruddy complexion of a moderately unsuccessful pig-farmer”.<sup>1</sup> He went everywhere on a bicycle, and was a Labour district councillor in Cambridge, gaining a reputation for battling on behalf of tenants who were under threat of eviction - usually from property owned by Cambridge colleges. He was also a Cambridge academic himself. Devoted to his students, he would wait until the end of the teaching term before decamping to Silicon Valley.

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<sup>1</sup> John Naughton (2003) Lay it on in shovels for Roger, The Observer, February 16, 2003

Every time you type in a computer password you are making use of research that Roger Needham did in 1966. This genius in computer security, the design of operating systems, memory management systems and networking, and the founding director of Microsoft's Cambridge lab, died in 2003. When the history of the digital revolution is one day written, there is a very good chance that this modest man - this good citizen with an acute sense of wonder - will be given a place in history above that of even Bill Gates. Let us hope so, especially because of his vision of research. Needham once wrote these words:

"It's very easy to do research if you think research is just finding out what nobody knows. Well, that's not good enough; if you want to do research, you want to do research that would have some influence. A lot of research is done which sure adds to our knowledge, but it adds to our knowledge in ways that we didn't find very useful. The best research is done with a shovel, not tweezers."

Fundamentally, art and design is about making our world a more usable, beautiful and meaningful place. This diverse family of creative disciplines has the potential to explore questions of great significance and value to our dangerous, damaged and uncertain world. To realise that potential we must bring focus our vision, values and talents in new, highly relevant and socially responsible ways. We must visualise research differently.

So, read this book, pick up your shovel, and get digging.