

Methods of contextualising

Graphic design is a relational practice that not only reflects but actively reconfigures the contexts within which it is framed. These include its cultural, social, environmental, historical, political, disciplinary, and professional contexts (among others).

In this brief you'll work in a small group to consider your own position(s) within some of these contexts and develop a studio-based experiment that explores, deepens, or extends them critically.

"Rapid Response Collecting was introduced in 2014 as a new type of collecting activity at the V&A. Contemporary objects are acquired in response to major moments in recent history that touch the world of design and manufacturing. Many of the objects have been newsworthy either because they advance what design can do, or because they reveal truths about how we live." [V&A]

With your small group, **visit the V&A Rapid Response Collecting rooms** (74, 74A, and 76). Take some time to carefully review all the objects on display, then **identify three objects** that are particularly interesting to your group. Through discussion as a group, consider the following questions in relation to each selected object:

Would you have expected to encounter this object in a museum setting? How do you approach or understand it differently in this context? How have the V&A curators specifically contextualized it (through its mode of display, through accompanying texts, or through other gestures)? Why was this object included in the collection? What is the story of its acquisition? What are its formal and material qualities, and how do these reflect its contexts (cultural, political, industrial, economic, etc.)?

Discuss how each group member understands this object based on their *individual* positions (refer again to the definition to the right). How do your positions differ from each others'? From the curators'? From the maker's? What questions about this object and its contexts could you explore further as a group?

Then **select one of these objects** to critically interrogate as a group using the studio-based methods you've developed in previous briefs: **investigating, cataloguing, translating, and iterating**. Together you will develop a body of work that explores, deepens, or extends your position(s) in relation to this object. To help you get started, some making prompts are shown to the right.

SCHEDULE

w/c Feb 7	Visit V&A as a group, review required reading, begin working
Feb 15–17	Intermediate presentations of substantial work in progress
Feb 22–24	Final presentations and feedback
Mon, Feb 28 14:00 GMT	Deadline for posting your written response (blog) and feedback notes (via SharePoint); written response also submitted via Moodle as part of Unit 1 summative assessment submission

PROVISIONAL DEFINITIONS

position(s)

The course handbook offers this definition: Positions are perspectives, ethics, claims, situated experiences, or identities framing the way you engage with a research question or an external condition. Positions are relational and contextual. A position may be either explicit or implicit, either claimed or inherited, but all knowledge is shaped by the position—or positions—of those who generate it.

MAKING PROMPTS

- Use the tools of graphic and communication design to investigate the object's formal properties (its material, construction, style, etc.)
- Visually map a context or network within which the object is situated (its production, circulation, use, chronology, press coverage, etc.)
- Translate the object into a new medium in order to introduce it into a different (but specific) context
- Circulate, distribute, or publish the object—or some translation of it—via a different platform or economy
- Reimagine your object through the lens of one of the references you've found for your annotated bibliography

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WRITTEN RESPONSE

Develop a piece of writing in response to the given prompt. Look for ways to engage deeply and critically with writing as a medium, considering how the structure, tone, and visual qualities of your writing are implicated in the formation of knowledge. Take a creative and exploratory approach.

Post your writing to your blog (either as a text entry or an attached file) and submit via Moodle as part of your Unit 1 summative assessment submission.

Please ensure that you follow academic conventions for referencing and quoting the work of others. At UAL we use a version of the Harvard style of referencing. Details and examples can be found at citethemrightonline.com.

PROMPT

The written response for this brief consists of two parts:

- 1 A 150–200-word statement that articulates the critical question (or enquiry) that your group asked through your collaborative studio explorations. In other words: What were you exploring, how were you exploring it, and what key insights did you generate?
- 2 An annotated bibliography consisting of 6 references that each acts as a lens through which to view your selected object from the V&A Rapid Response collection:

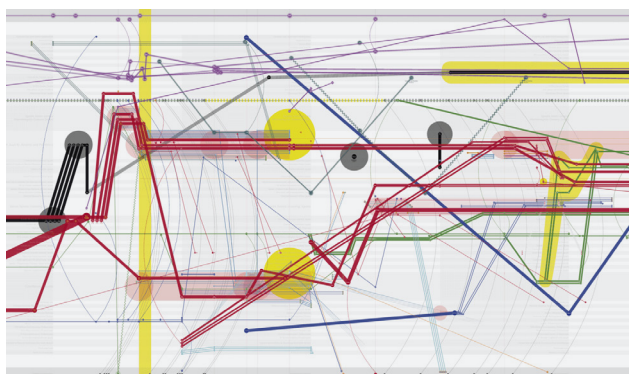
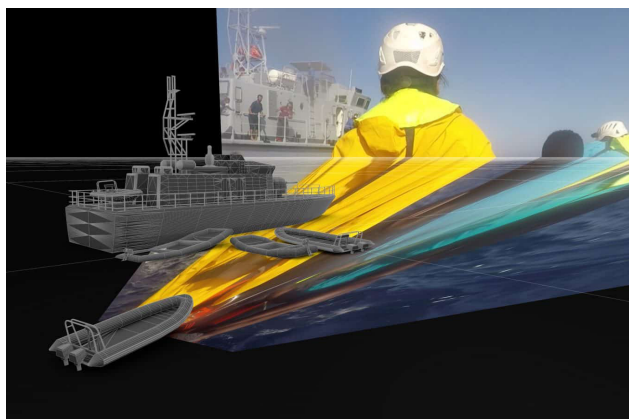
2 texts from the reading list
2 texts that you find outside the reading list
2 design practices/projects

You will undoubtedly find more references than just these 6. Be selective in this bibliography and include only those references that are most relevant, most specific, most critically engaged, or most influential for the development of your project. Prioritize references that *analyse* over ones that *report*.

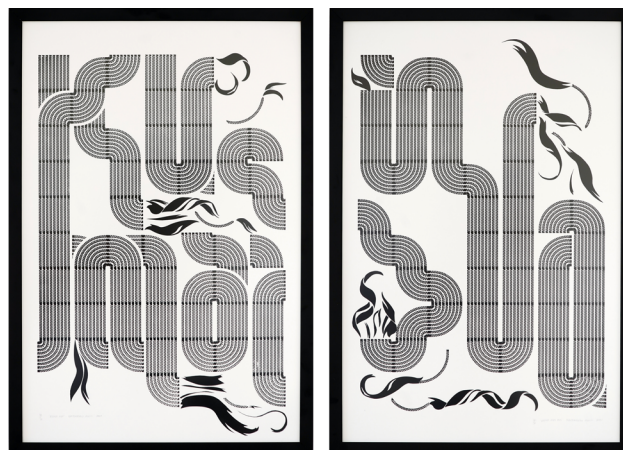
For the purposes of this brief, an annotated bibliography is a set of Harvard-style bibliographical entries, each accompanied by a short statement (150–200 words) explaining how the reference enhances or challenges your understanding of your object. (Don't summarize the reference; instead, put it in context of your group's enquiry.)

Note: You should develop your reference list as a group, but each group member must create their own written response—using their own words and reflecting their individual perspectives.

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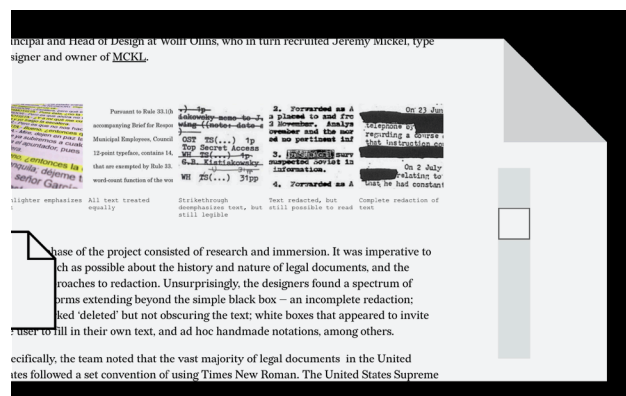
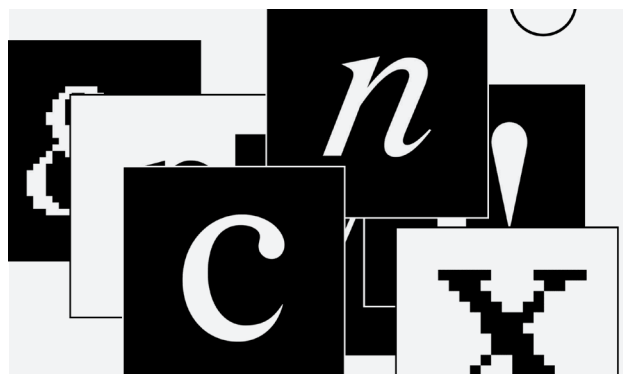


Above: Forensic Architecture investigates human rights violations using methods and technologies drawn from the fields of architecture and design. The contexts in which their work is created (such as through commission or partnerships), and the requirements of its use (often as evidence in courtrooms or parliamentary enquiries), dictate how the work develops and communicates.



Above: Through her practice, Nontsikelelo Mutiti explores questions of identity and history, often engaging with existing archives or creating new collections of material.

Below: Forest Young and Jeremy Mickel created the typeface *Redaction*, which is both a formal exploration of the effects of typography, editing, and reproduction in legal documents, as well as an interrogation of the role of graphic design in the American justice system.



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REQUIRED READING

Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14(3), 1988 [[pdf](#)]
Francisco Laranjo, 'Critical Graphic Design: Critical of What?', *Modes of Criticism*, 2014 [[article](#)]

FURTHER READING

Sara Ahmed, 'Introduction', *Living a Feminist Life*, 2017 [[pdf](#)]
Carl DiSalvo, 'Adversarial Design as Inquiry and Practice', *Adversarial Design*, 2012 [[e-book](#)]

PRACTICES LED BY POSITIONS

Forensic Architecture
Diedrick Brackens
Hardworking Goodlooking
Jenny Holzer
Arthur Jafa
Barbara Kruger
Sheila Levant de Bretteville
Metahaven
Jeremy Mickel and Forest Young, *Redaction* typeface
Nontsikelelo Mutiti
Ruben Pater
Rebecca Ross, *London is Changing*
Hito Steyerl
Nicoline van Harskamp

to point out just a few...