

Illustration for the Internet Space

'A lot of Illustration sits very awkwardly alongside the contemporary digital typography scene. It can look naive, almost folksy'.

Dan Fern, Eye Magazine 83

It was in 2001 that the book 'Pen & Mouse: Commercial Art and Digital Illustration' by Angus Hyland set out to survey how illustration had come to terms with the digital medium. The many books published subsequently are testament to how popular Illustration has become. It is now a vibrant profession that has moved well beyond discussions about the digital, analogue, or craft. The advent of greater accessibility to screen-print technology & Risograph machines has even led to a resurgence of print for illustrators, evidenced by the popularities of contemporary graphic art fairs such as Pick Me Up at Somerset House. The thriving area of self-publishing for Illustrators has enabled many to self-author edition books, graphic novels, magazines, or Zines, thus empowering illustrators through an entrepreneurial spirit to provoke commissions. In tandem with this resurgence of analogue technology however there should be a parallel exploration of the space offered by the Internet.

With the advent of new digital platforms such as the Kindle or iPad, the need for visual content to support text will increase. As more illustration moves online the potential for work existing within a timeline allows for a greater exploration of narrative through small movement. With a blink of an eye, the change of day to night, the introduction of sound to the illustration, the image can now convey a greater sense of drama, meaning, atmosphere, emotion, and humour than ever before. Sequence & narratives are inherent within Illustration & these opportunities need to be embraced by Illustrators to provoke future commissions.

One of the strongest memories of the opening ceremony at the London 2012 Olympics was of the unabashed use of digital technology transforming the interior of the stadium with pixelated light pads to render messages & images.

The next day I went along for another look at the Julian Opie exhibition at the Lisson Gallery. This time a little more space to fully absorb the subtlety of the work on display.

What I found most significant about the show is the potential for illustration. Across various media Julian Opie plays with ideas whilst still retaining his graphic sensibility/visual language. The computer-animated pictures are very playful in their subtle use of movement. A rural landscape at night punctuated by the headlights of a car passing in the distance. Looking up at the gently swaying flowers whilst in the sky vapour trails majestically criss-cross. These pictures sit somewhere in between static images & animation. The economical use of movement allows the work to retain its pictorial narrative without being fully animated.

In previous animated work Opie draws the figure of a woman in his recognizably thick black line, but she moves with all of the subtlety of a real woman, the gentle swaying hips bring these drawings to life on a continuous loop.

Marshall Arisman, Chair of the MFA Illustration as Visual Essay Department at the School of Visual Arts in New York, has said that all students should be learning technology for new forms of authorial work – especially exploring the area of animation & what that can facilitate. Whilst still acknowledging the importance of print self-publishing, it is within the moving image, the digital realm, that there is great potential for Illustration students to create a market for their work.

To clarify I would say that this is animation within Illustration practice, rather than as a separate academic discipline. Moving image should be a natural part of Illustration practice, with a pressing need for students to be familiar with current digital software.

Jake Evans, a graduate of the Illustration course at the University of Brighton, memorably coined the term for me as 'the laptop TV generation' during a discussion about contemporary studio practice at the university. Identifying the phenomenon of the desktop being the pin board or sketchbook for a newer generation of student grown up with the accessibility of YouTube, of communicating across multiple

platforms, social networks, instant exposure to the public, & of the many distractions available at your fingertips.

The Chilean film maker Alejandro Jodorowsky has stated that 'We are in an age beyond definitions' – when aligning his artistic practice with that of the mobile phone, which is at once a telephone, something you text with, check your emails on, photograph & film with. Illustration needs to be multidisciplinary to maintain relevance.

'...Professional life has changed for everyone... once you'd learn something at college and there would be a career waiting for you in that particular area – all of that's blown wide open as you know.'

Dan Fern, Eye Magazine 83

The global popularity of Illustration driven by its accessibility on the internet has opened many more opportunities for the profession, but has also flooded the market, speeded up the tolerance for consuming images. It is now far easier to gain attention via the Internet, but difficult to retain when you are only a click away from distraction, or the next new thing?

The New York Times are seemingly at the forefront of this use of online editorial illustration. Former Designer for the Sunday Magazine Hilary Greenbaum explained that the digital had changed everything about how they commission – reflecting the culture of searching for inspiration, rather than the passive reliance upon Illustration Agents to offer a wallpaper of choice. So they look towards It's Nice That & other blogs to survey a curated overview of work with contemporary currency. Once again Self-Authorship was mentioned, especially within the context of digital/online arena – A means of further developing a visual world, language beyond the still image. Also available to a global audience almost immediately – exposing work to comment, debate, interaction, & 'like' – truly democratic?

An illustration of a store front, silent, almost reminiscent of Edward Hopper, but with the gentle swaying of the store sign & the walk/don't walk indicator of the pedestrian crossing brings the scene alive, offering a sense of life or narrative by these simple movements - The New York Times Opinion Pages Rebecca Mock - Main Street's Landlord.

A look at the interactive observations of the London 2012 Olympics, by Illustrator Christoph Niemann for the New York Times suggest the playfulness possible on the emerging digital platforms. The daily observations during the summer on the online journal Abstract Sunday allowed the viewer to play with the drawings, thereby engaging the audience with Christoph's humour, & maybe reflective of how the general public embraced the games & made them their own? – Perhaps a direction for Illustrators to use motion or interactivity to communicate personal viewpoint, a sense of place/location, humour, narrative/storytelling, a visual world...

For these pieces Christoph needed to learn a basic element of coding language to aid his collaboration with the programmers who made the reactive movements work. So perhaps it is necessary for the Illustrator to engage further with the digital & learn to collaborate with others? To help shape possible streams of work by demonstrating what can be done with such technology & take ownership of this territory?

Digital needs to be embraced for what it can add to Illustration rather than a retreat into a faux naïve folk aesthetic? Whilst the low-fi Zine, Print, Art Fair culture is vibrant & culturally enriching, for a sustained career as an illustrator there has to be an acceptance of the changing landscape for Illustration as a discipline, both economically & technologically.

'... The digital gives us the opportunity to really twist things & to give it an additional layer.'

Tara Dougans - speaking at the Varoom event 'Taste' at Foyles Bookshop in 2012

Creative Review recently called 2012 the year of the .gif – An indication of the proliferation of this animation form that Illustrators are beginning to exploit & subvert. Within Photoshop software this tool

allows simple loops in a timeline & the effect of animation simply by switching layers on & off. Viewed within a browser they allow work to exist in time.

In 2012 Brighton Illustration graduate Jonathan Taylor produced a series of works that purely existed on the Internet – 'The Internet Makes Me Tired' was living Illustration, permanently there, a figure curled up & hiding from the world.

Tara Dougans, a Fashion Illustrator & Art Director based in Amsterdam, is one of many illustrators working within the fashion world to produce 20second narratives for designers & manufacturers. The .gifs allow Tara to further her visual world, by introducing small moments of motion, that are hypnotic in their simplicity - they lengthen our attention span, engage the audience with delight & wonder. The ease at which someone can make a .gif within Photoshop shows how Adobe software will eventually merge – the step from Photoshop into AfterEffects will be short & become a natural translation of the drawing into motion? For the next generation of illustrators it will be a seamless step & open up many opportunities.

As Internet commerce grows, the drive to retain visitors on such websites, or 'dwell time' is increasingly becoming necessary for retailers, for whom a possible customer is only a click away from leaving the virtual shop. The need for an equal balance to form & functionality of websites will increase as digital platforms multiply.

As Greg Burns, a director of Big Active Creative Agency indicates it is the fashion world that is leading the development of this short form of film-making. The space between the still image & animation – documentary, authorial, issues based, personal viewpoints/beliefs, content & opinion. Motion requires greater content beyond a 'look' or 'style', and in an age of distraction & an illustrator on every street corner the need to stand out & offer something unique in what you say will be essential.

Cinemagraphs – Visual Graphics Artist Kevin Burg & Photographer Jamie Beck combined to experiment with the .gif format to bring moments of life to photographs of the New York Fashion Week. They term these as 'living moments', & bring a sense of the theatre of a catwalk collection. Is this not true of Illustration that has always been about the creation of a visual world?

Quentin Jones is one of these Illustrators exploiting this area of the 20second narrative – Producing short films for brands such as Chanel. It is a territory not exactly mapped out, but something undoubtedly important - having huge potential for Illustrators to extend their visual world beyond the static printed page. Providing a drawing with additional personality, to give it a sound? Fashion brands are investing quite a lot of money within this area – to extend the visual identity of their brands, & being reactive to an ever-changing market economy.

Print is by no means dead, & the emerging digital platforms are not to be feared, illustrators should see them as further means of articulating ideas & telling stories, a corner stone of what Illustration has always been good at. To take ownership of new technology & encourage Art Directors & Designers in how illustration can be used across both print & the online environment.

The use by Julian Opie of multiple mediums I would argue shows that illustrators can retain their visual language across platforms without losing their identity, or signature look, but it is important that they understand how their work should exist within these mediums, to take command of how their work should move or sound - An extension of the visual world created by illustrators.

We are at a time of much change within the Graphic Design industry, & illustration with such a broad breadth of definition has an inherent flexibility to convey messages & narratives across many mediums. A possible future Space for Illustration?

Julian Opie

<http://www.lissongallery.com/>

The New York Times

http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/12/21/opinion/20121230_YEAR-IN-ILLUSTRATIONS.html#/?slide=64

Christoph Niemann

<http://niemann.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/08/08/competitive-armchair-olympics-rocket-man/>

Christmas Gifs

<http://christmasgifs.org/>

Nowness

http://www.nowness.com/day/2012/12/4/2639/gif-it-up--award-winning-animated-stills?icid=Previously_art

Jonathan Taylor

<http://theinternetmakesmetired.com>

Tara Dougans

<http://www.taradougans.com/>

Cinemagraphs

<http://cinemagraphs.com/>

Quentin Jones

http://www.quentinjones.info/www.quentinjones.info/QUENTIN_JONES.html

Nowness

<http://www.nowness.com/day/2012/4/23/2073/quentin-jones-naked-with-paint>