

**REMAKE
REMODEL
REDUCE**

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YOUNG**

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INTRODUCTION

I was a professional graphic designer for over 15 years. I worked in both large and small agencies and experienced many methods of working. But there was always one constant. Clients. My job was to convey the benefit of their product or service in a compelling and engaging way. This is where the trouble begins. Clients who have paid a lot of money for creative work and media space want to say as much as possible to as many people as possible. But by trying to say everything they often end up saying nothing. Bombarding an audience with too much information can be a turn off. You don't know what to ignore first. My instinct has always been that less is more. Discover what the most important thing is and say it clearly. But to be brief is to be brave.

The intention of this research was to test the theory that less is more. Whether reducing the amount of information one communicates can be more effective. And to use the experience of the audience to help tell a story.

I was keen to explore new ways of thinking and working. However it is impossible to 'unknow' everything I have learned as a designer. In industry you have to think in a very visual way. You have to imagine the finished work while you are reading the brief. To disrupt this visual way of thinking I used writing as my primary method of working. Using pencil and paper to capture my thoughts as soon as I had them.

It was my aim to develop a way of working that would go beyond my initial research. A method that I, and others, could use again and again. With this aim in place, the work began.



fig 1

I wanted to look at an existing story and break it down to its component parts. Then put it back together to see what can be left out whilst still being understood. I thought that the reduction of information - or reductionism, as I was calling it - was simply a case of removing information to leave behind just what was needed to tell the story. But this is just editing.

It was important to choose a story unknown to me so I could approach it without preconceptions. I chose 'A Recoverist Manifesto' (Parkinson, 2015). To me it was a 'new' story. But one with themes I could relate to and understand.

It was in Eindhoven during Dutch Design Week 2014 that I began to explore the idea that reductionism could be a bit more complicated than I first thought. But it wasn't a type of storytelling that made me think this. It was a piece of furniture.

Lex and Woes (2014) make beautiful wooden furniture by masking off the pieces they want to keep, and sandblasting away the bits they don't (fig 1). It's the parts that were removed - the parts that were absent - that told their 'story'. They changed the physical attributes of the wood in a complex - and messy - way. This gave me the insight that reductionism isn't necessarily simple or easy. And in deciding what would be told in my story and what would be absent could mean getting my hands dirty.

I had to consider what a story really is. And how you could make it resonate with an audience. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, John Campbell (2008: 23) writes about how myths from around the world follow a similar structure:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

What I found particularly interesting is that different unconnected cultures have developed similar myths and stories to satisfy the innate desire for individuals to put themselves in the story. I wanted the story I told to resonate with the audience in this way.

I also found inspiration from outside the world of storytelling when looking at how an audience can participate in a story. In Erich Harth's (2004) paper 'Art and Reductionism', he explains that in physics reductionism attempts to weave a fabric of cause and effect from the complex to the elementary: 'reductionism is the most powerful strategy known to science' (Ramachandran, 2001, cited in Harth, 2004: 111). However the human brain doesn't behave this way. Our thoughts and feelings are not just shaped by the bottom-up influences of our genes but by the top-down effects of experience.

You can reduce the information the brain 'sees' but not what it 'knows'. So more can be taken away than I anticipated. And what is taken out is as important as what is left behind. This allows the audience to engage with the story as it asks more of them.

As I began to develop design experiments I started to see elements of reduction and absence in the Recoverist Manifesto. An addict can be reduced to a behaviour rather than a person. And in recovery they are reduced again when they leave their addiction behind. I decided to focus on alcoholism as I have some experience of this and if I want my audience to participate in the storytelling I have to be able to talk in a way I feel is real. As I'm developing a new way of working I wanted to give myself the best chance of being understood.

I had to define what reductionism was for my practice. Reductionism already has many definitions, some of them derogatory, suggesting it was to simplify a complex idea or issue to the point of obscuring or distorting it (Dictionary.com, 2014). This is the opposite of what I wanted to do.

I defined reductionism as storytelling through absence. This led me to develop a reductionism manifesto (fig 2). That set out my methodology. The next step was to test this method to see if it worked in practice.

A Reductionist Manifesto

What is your story?
What do you understand about it?
How does it make you feel?
Can you explain it?
Can you picture it?
What is the most important thing you are saying?
Are you leaving anything out to tell your story?
Do you know why you are leaving it out?
Are you obscuring the story with new meaning?
Do you know your audience?

Reductionism: Storytelling through absence

Have a story to tell
Understand what is important
Consider what is absent
Don't obscure the meaning
Allow the audience to participate

fig 2

METHOD

I used a cut-up technique to look for meaning in my source text (fig 3). William S Burrows used this method to decode implicit content: 'When you cut into the present the future leaks out.' (Burrows, 2010, 1 min 16). From these cut-ups I created a series of haiku. But I found that this wasn't telling the story I wanted to tell. The meaning was becoming obscured. By creating poetry I felt I was romanticising the idea of alcoholism. And this isn't a romantic story.

It was only after I had identified the bottle as the metonymy for my project that things began to click into place.

I had created images by shining light through a bottle where all that could be seen was a ghost of a bottle that was absent (fig 4). But they were too abstract. It was the phenomenological theory of Bracketing that made me consider that the physical glass object I held in my hands could be the main character in my story.

Bracketing enables "investigators (to) set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination" (Cresswell, 2007: 59). The act of 'seeing' a bottle qualifies as a mental experience, whether you see the bottle in person, in a dream, or in a picture. Bracketing the bottle suspends any judgement about it as a noumenon, and instead analyses the phenomenon of a bottle in the mind.

As I thought more about the materiality of bottles I was reminded of the nursery rhyme Ten Green Bottles. This was particularly relevant as in the rhyme the number of bottles is reduced.

The rhyme originally refers to policemen who wore green uniforms in London in the 1830s (Hunt, 1999). But I was satisfied that the rhyme had come to represent actual bottles.

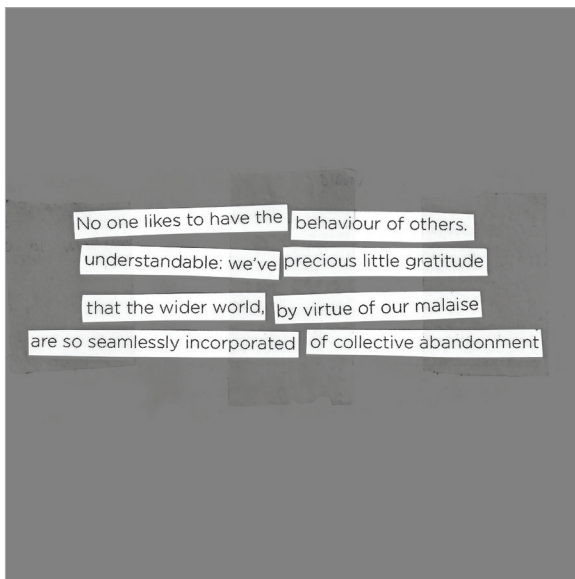


fig 3

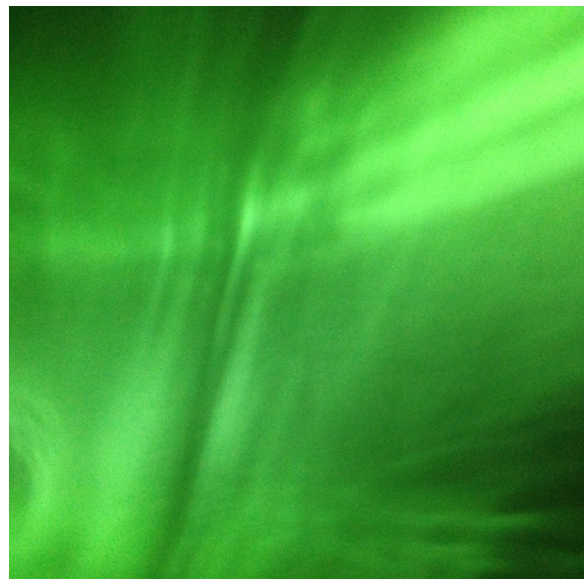


fig 4



fig 5

The process of designing the published version of Recoverist Manifesto helped me find what I considered to be it's true essence (fig 5).

The story contains only two drinks. The 'first' drink, the 'shame' drink:

I think that nobody quite knows which drink it is that takes him over the edge of being merely a social or hearty laughing drinker, into a morose and hung-over wretched creature who shakes and creaks and sweats and has nightmares and it's always November and it's raining and it's three o'clock in the morning and there's nowhere to go and you reach out for a cigarette and smoke and think about all the horrible things you've done in your life and all the shames you've endured and suffered. (Burton, 1980 cited in Parkinson, 2015: 6).

Then the 'last' drink, the 'honour' drink. The drink you don't have. There is the potential for more drinks after this but this is the start of recovery. I would use ten green bottles as a setting to tell this story. Of the ten bottles it's unknown which will be the 'first' or 'last' drink. During this period I discovered an artist that would broaden my horizons and help me bring my story to life.

The Cornelia Parker exhibition at the Whitworth Art Gallery was a revelation. I could see links in her work with what I was trying to do, particularly the work with the off-cuts of poppies filling an entire room (Parker, 2015) (fig 6). This told a story of absent soldiers and the gaps they had left behind in the lives of their families. I was impressed by the scale and ambition of the work. It made me want to think bigger and it gave me the idea that I can tell my story in different ways. And each way I tell it could complement the other. I could create a body of work that told my story in various lengths and detail. This way I could experiment with absence and see how far I could push it.

But it also made me realise that the space a piece of work is shown in can be as important as the work itself. A lot of Parker's work is sculptural, but I felt that it didn't have the space to breathe. It was displayed in the way you would expect paintings to be hung, without enough space to consider each piece individually. When I curated the Object and Context exhibition I learnt that how you encounter an object says just as much as the object itself (fig 7). I displayed all the pieces on the floor inside an implied threshold. This gave the objects a special reverence and turned the worthless into the valuable. If I was going to use physical objects to tell my story I had to consider where and how my audience would interact with it.

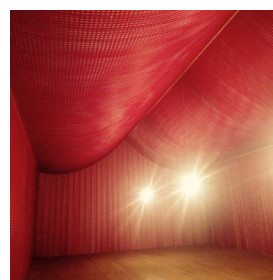


fig 7

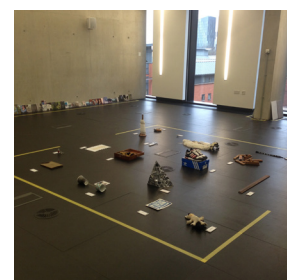


fig 8



fig 8

The Recoverist Manifesto is a story of addiction. I see addiction as an insidious thing, something that creeps up on you, very slowly then very quickly. To capture this feeling I melted ten green bottles and displayed them in a sequence of collapse. To illustrate the destructive power of addiction once you were in it. I also had to show the journey into addiction; the 'first' drink.

My idea was to have ten green bottles on a plinth. This represents the pedestal that alcoholics are put on when they are defined by their addiction rather than as an individual. The bottles are evenly distributed along the top. Each bottle is empty, the drink absent, so the viewer wouldn't know which was the 'first' drink. Each bottle is lit from beneath by a light inside the plinth, to highlight the materiality of the bottle. During testing time it was commented that this had an almost religious effect. It made the bottles look like sacred objects. This was not a conscious intention, but one I was satisfied with (fig 8).

The story needed a final chapter, one that is about recovery. It had to be more positive and hopeful after the first two chapters. It had to be about the 'last' drink you don't have. And to show that the story doesn't end there; there are other drinks after this, the ones you choose not to have. I designed and screen-printed ten beer mats quoting positive messages from people in recovery from a Recoverist Manifesto (Parkinson, 2015). In chapter three the bottle is absent, but the beer mats show the potential to drink again. With my three plinths and three chapters I am telling a complete story (fig 9).

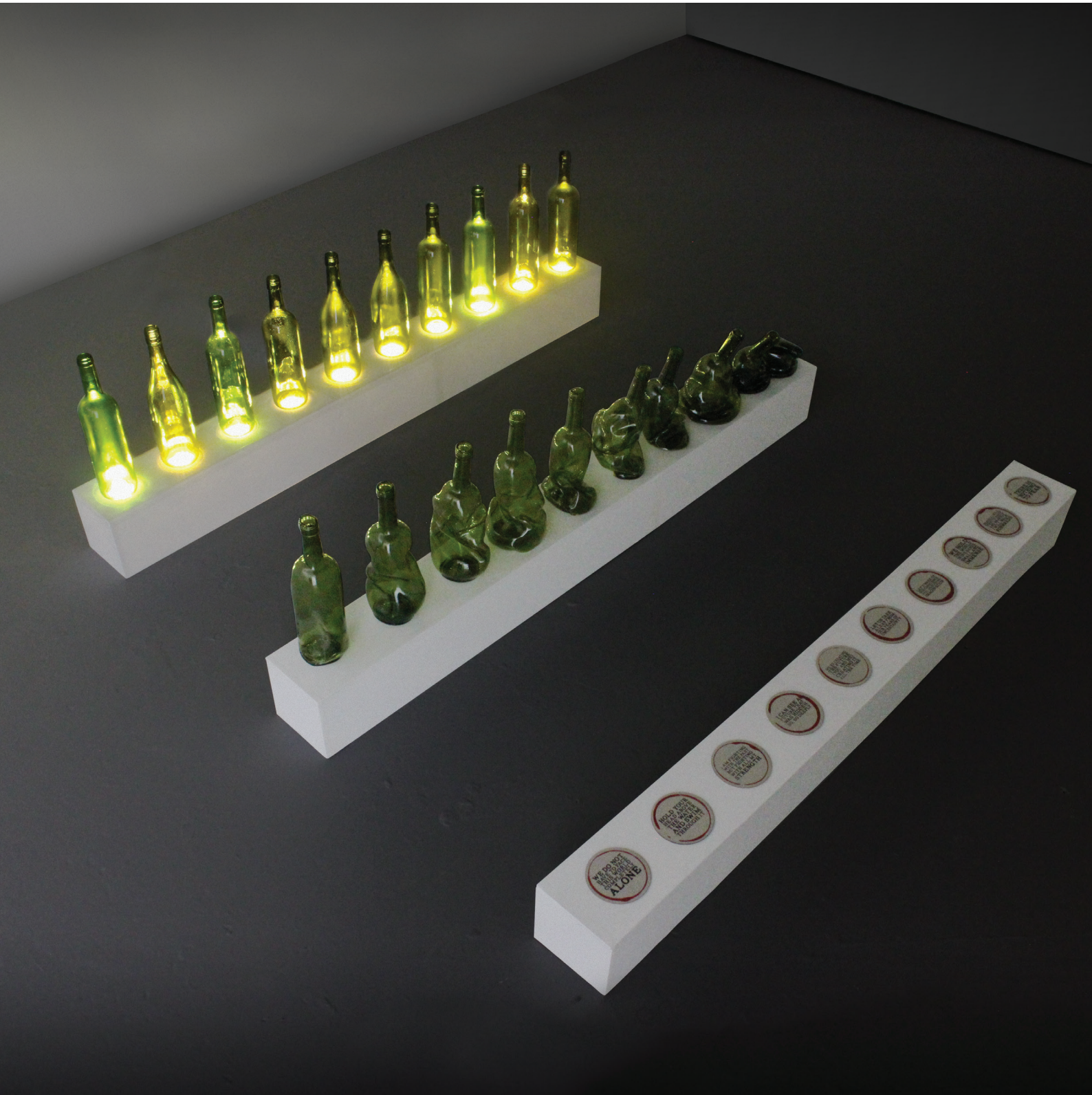


fig 9



fig 10

But I wanted to see if I could push the idea of absence further.

The idea of the 'first' or 'last' drink being the next one you have, made me think of Russian Dolls that hide inside each other getting gradually smaller. I thought I could do this with wine bottles – cut them in half and place them inside each other. The whole would be contained within a part. This was Gestalt theory in physical form (Tuck, 2010). For the bottles to fit inside each other they would have to get smaller. But wine bottles don't come in uniform sizes. Even if I made perfect facsimiles in glass the story would be distorted; the bottles had to have contained alcohol for my story to be real.

These experiments led me in another direction. Gluing the tops of two bottles together created a double-ended bottle. This would be the 'first' drink. Drinking from either end could tip you over the edge.

Gluing the bottom halves of two bottles together created the drink you don't have, the drink you don't get to. I designed a label that wrapped around the bottle that could be read from either end (fig 10). This was my story told with two objects. I called this the 'abridged version'.

But I had pushed it too far. I had taken too much away to tell a coherent story. My 3 plinths felt like they had an honesty to them. The two double ended bottles felt like they were trying too hard. However, It was a worthwhile - if unsuccessful - experiment. It would not be the last.

For the Recoverist Manifesto I had created a physical response to the story. I also developed a graphic version that was 'portable'. That could be seen by an audience without having to visit an installation. This gave me several versions of the same story (fig 11).

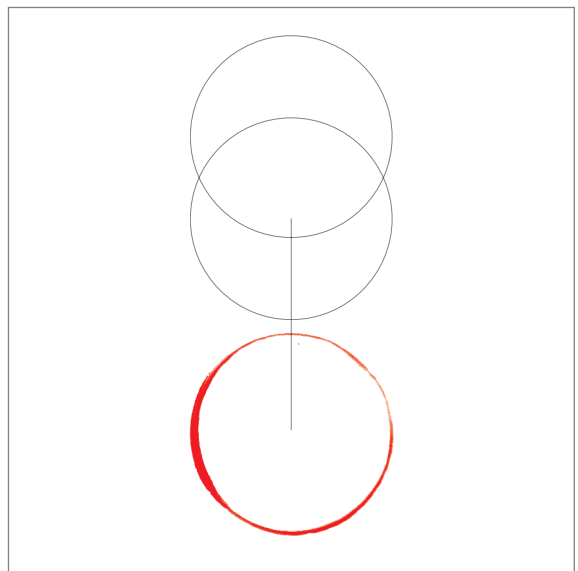
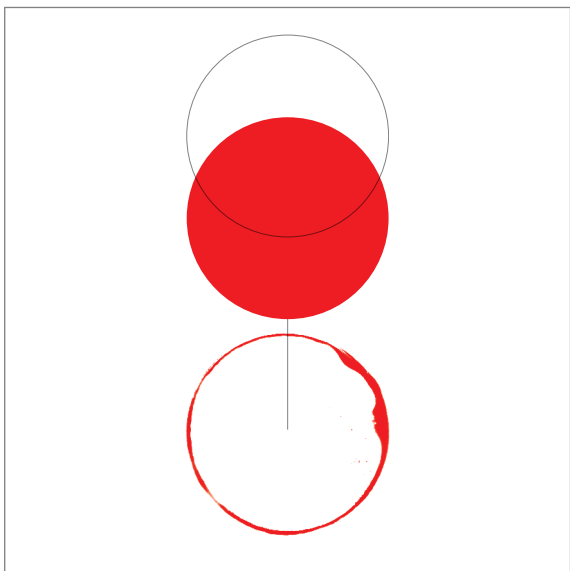
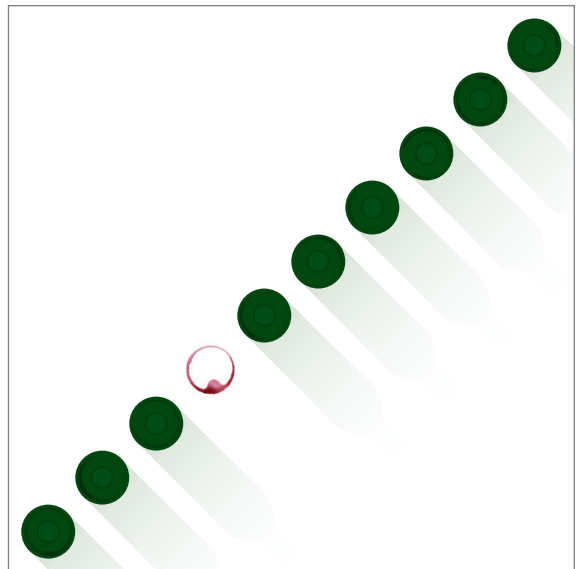
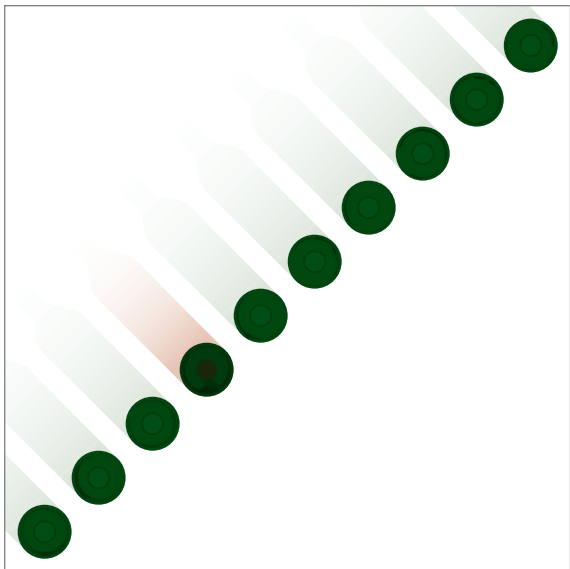


fig 11

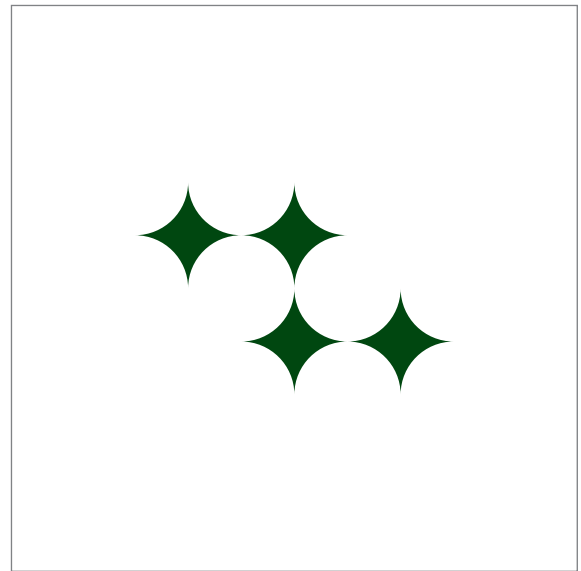
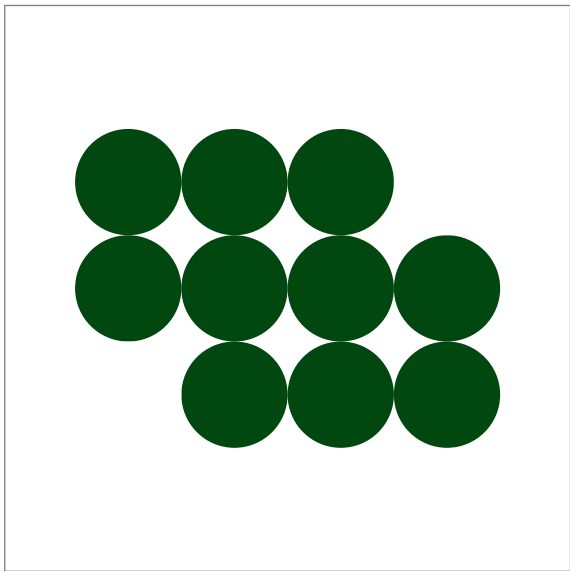
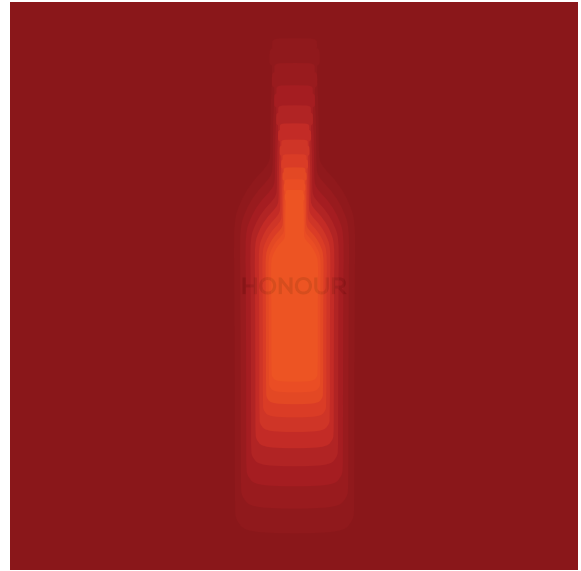
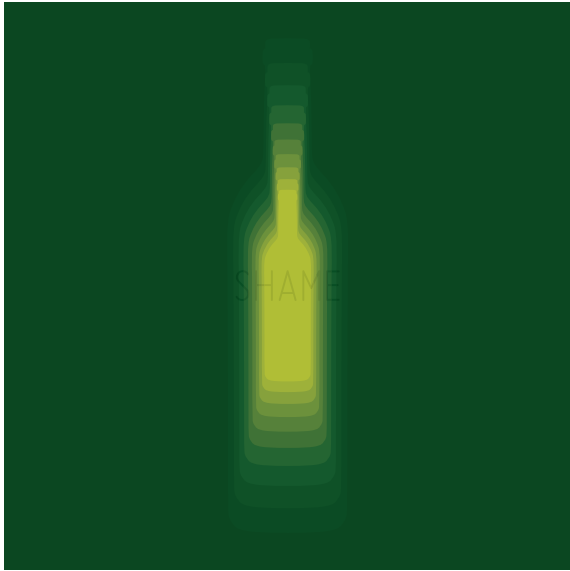


fig 11

Consider

What is your story?
What do you understand about it?
How does it make you feel?
How would you explain it?
What is the most important thing you are saying?
What are you leaving out to tell your story?
Why you are leaving it out?
What new meaning could be obscuring your story?
What do you know about your audience?

fig 12

Reflect

Have a story to tell
Understand what is important
Consider what is absent
Don't obscure the meaning
Allow the audience to participate

Reductionism: **Storytelling through absence**

fig 13

It was at this point that I realised that my practice had become too focused on this one story. My work had become all about the Recoverist Manifesto and not my Reductionist Manifesto. My methodology only worked if I could apply it to any story. So I used my Professional Platforms option to test my methodology. Using my Manifesto with 4 graphic design undergraduates I briefed them to use it to tell their own stories. I learned as much about the Manifesto as the students. The basic principles were sound. But I discovered that it contained a lot of closed questions. Once I had revised it based on feedback from the students it was a lot more coherent (fig 12 & 13).

Each student chose their own story and considered who their audience was. Over a number of sessions we worked towards a final piece of work for their portfolio. What was particularly pleasing was that they said the manifesto had made them think differently about all their work, and helped them focus on what to put in their final BA show.

After this project I was satisfied that my manifesto could work. And that I could make it work for me. But that's another story.

FINDINGS

Not for the first time, I found my inspiration for the next part of my practice in the pub.

A fellow MA student had just returned from a trip to Chernobyl and was telling us about it. A lot of other people had never heard of it. I was amazed by this. I considered it to be the most significant event in post-war Europe, yet lots of people appeared to know very little about it. I started to research the disaster to see if there was scope for me to use it as my next story. There was.

My audience would be people who were too young to remember the disaster. And the basis of the story would be how a global event was reported and communicated in the days before 24 hour rolling news and the Internet. I decided that I would only use information contemporary to the disaster, uninhibited by hindsight and the standards of today. How was it communicated and who knew what when?

The Recoverist story had been told with physical objects and flat graphics. For the Chernobyl story I wanted to use writing as my method. This would test the scope of my Manifesto.

As my research progressed the sense of my story became clearer.

Vast amounts of radiation released from the Chernobyl power plant covered large swathes of Europe. But the town only 3km from the reactor didn't hear about it until 2 days after the explosion. This set the tone for how the whole event unfolded. The absence in this story is the absence of truth. The first the world knew about it was when high levels of radiation were detected in Sweden. It was only then that it was reported on Soviet television.

Evacuation column	126	buses
	300	trucks
Stretched for	15	kilometres
	34,000	evacuated from Kiev
	9,000	left Pripyat in their own cars
	10	Kilometre evacuation zone by 2nd May
	30	Kilometre evacuation zone by 5th May
Total evacuees	16,000	people
	86,000	head of cattle
Benefits payments	4000	Rubles per person
	7000	Rubles for a family of two
	1000*	Kilometres of land contaminated
	200,000	tons of leaves buried outside Kiev
RBMK1000 produced	1000	MW
Population of Chernobyl	12,500	
	15	Kilometres from the plant
	45,000	live in Pripyat
	176	duty staff on site
	268	builders on site
	155,000	people rehoused
	28	firemen fought the fire
	108	people hospitalised within 4 hours
	40,000	people evacuated in 2 hours 45 minutes
	36	hours from explosion to evacuation
	299	people diagnosed with radiation syndrome
	13,200	evacuees from Byelorussian villages
	400,000	tonnes of concrete used to entomb the reactor
	6000	tonnes of metal used in tomb

2	millisievert: natural background radiation
2	hours: notice to evacuate
8	kilometres: evacuation zone within 8 days
15	kilometres: evacuation convoy length
26	firemen: on-site in 11 minutes
36	kilometres: evacuation zone within 11 days
36	hours: explosion to evacuation
55	hours: radioactivity detected in Sweden
68	hours: first announcement on TV
100	millisievert: limit for radiation workers
108	hospitalised: within 4 hours
126	hours: May Day parade goes ahead
176	duty staff: on site
186	firemen: on-site within 5 hours
268	builders: on site
299	people: radiation syndrome in first week
300	trucks: in evacuation
350	millisievert: exposure in residents
400	times more: radioactive than Hiroshima
1,000	square kilometres: land contaminated
1,000	megawatts: power produced
1,246	buses: in evacuation
2,000	tonnes: reactor lid: lifted in explosion
5,000	tonnes: sand, lead and clay deposited
6,000	tonnes: metal in sarcophagus
6,000	millisievert: dosage to workers
6,500	years: half-life of plutonium 240
13,000	evacuees: from nearby villages
24,300	years: half-life of plutonium 239
34,000	evacuated: from town
40,000	evacuated: from town in 2 hours 45 minutes
45,000	people: population of town
86,000	head of cattle: evacuated
16,000	people: evacuated
300,000	tonnes: leaves buried outside city
380,000	years: half-life of plutonium 242
31	dead

2	millisievert: dose of natural background radiation per year
2	hours: notice given: evacuate Pripyat
10	kilometre evacuation zone within 8 days
15	kilometres: distance from plant to town of Chernobyl
15	kilometres: length the evacuation convoy from Pripyat
28	firemen on-site within 11 minutes of explosion
30	kilometre evacuation zone within 11 days
30	years: lifespan of sarcophagus
36	hours from explosion to evacuation of Pripyat
55	hours after explosion: dangerous surge in radioactivity detected in Sweden
68	hours between explosion and announcement of accident on Moscow TV
100	millisievert: recommended limit for radiation workers every five years
108	hospitalised within 4 hours
120	hours after explosion: May Day parade held in Kiev
176	duty staff on site
186	firemen on-site within 5 hours of explosion
268	builders on site
299	people diagnosed with radiation syndrome in first week
300	trucks in Pripyat evacuation
350	millisievert: exposure of Chernobyl residents relocated in 1996
1,000	megawatts: power produced by RBMK1000 Reactor
1,000	square kilometres of land contaminated
1,000	tonne lid of reactor lifted in first explosion
1,246	buses in Pripyat evacuation
4,000	Rubles: benefits payment per Pripyat resident
5,000	tonnes of sand, lead and clay deposited onto reactor
6,000	tonnes: metal used in sarcophagus to entomb the reactor
6,000	millisievert: typical dosage in Chernobyl workers after the blast
9,000	left Pripyat in their own cars
12,500	live in Chernobyl
13,200	evacuees from Byelorussian villages
34,000	evacuated from Kiev
40,000	evacuated from Pripyat in 2 hours 45 minutes
45,000	live in Pripyat
86,000	head of cattle evacuated
116,000	people evacuated
155,000	people rehoused
300,000	tonnes: leaves buried outside Kiev
400,000	tonnes: concrete used in sarcophagus to entomb the reactor
31	total fatalities

fig 14

I made a list of the ‘facts’ from the official accounts of the disaster. From how many people were evacuated, to the half-life of Plutonium (fig 14). The numbers ranged from the very small to the very large. But the most shocking number was the amount of official fatalities. 31.

When you looked at how much radiation was released - 400 times more than Hiroshima (IAEA/WHO/EC International Conference, 1996) and the conditions in which the Liquidators - the soldiers, miners and firemen who cleaned up the reactor - worked in, it is plain to see that this number is absurd. I edited the list of ‘facts’ so the numbers became bigger and bigger. Until you come to the number at the bottom of the list. 31 dead. This story was about how if you look between the numbers you can see that something isn’t quite right. If the number of fatalities is unbelievable, then what else can you really believe?

But I had to find a way to humanise the story. To tell the story of the people it affected beyond the numbers.

To do this I wrote a series of poems from the perspective of the people affected at the time by the ‘truth’ they were told. These stories came from the documentary The Battle Of Chernobyl (2006). This gave me an emotional element to my story to give context to the facts and figures.

I started to design my story during ‘testing time’. This was a great time to do it as I got feedback from different perspectives as my designs were developing. This helped me understand what was important and where I was going wrong. I used found images of the disaster to ground my story in it’s own reality. Using black and white images taken by people in the days after the explosion. Then I took the people in the photographs away. They became absent. I made a book putting my poems and these images together (fig 15). But there was something about these images and words that didn’t ring true to me. Some of the feedback I received said they looked too literal. My words were intended to capture a feeling. But the images killed any nuance. They became too bleak and started to look like stills from a bad disaster movie. But it was in a movie where I found a way to get my story back on track.



fig 15

La Jetée (1962) is a science fiction film made using black and white photographs (fig 16). The stills give the film a real power and sense of otherness that would be missing from a moving image.

In The Battle Of Chernobyl (2006), the opening scenes are of home movie footage shot in Pripyat the day after the explosion. They showed normal people going about their daily business without any knowledge of the unfolding disaster 3km away. The only thing giving away the fact that something is wrong, is the distortion at the bottom of the screen caused by radiation leaking from the reactor reacting with the film. When you know this the film takes on a sinister quality. These are the images I would use in my story. And instead of a book I would make a film. A film of still images. The feeling evoked in the poetry would be juxtaposed with images of happy people. Using stills instead of the original moving footage was intended to show that the image was from the past. And that something had been lost.



fig 16

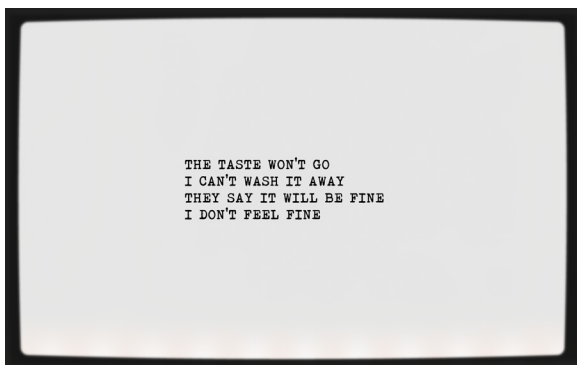
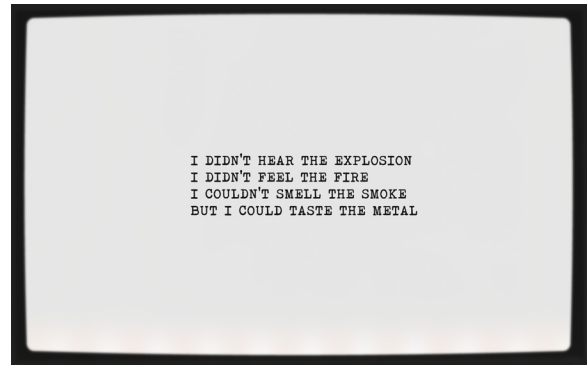


fig 19

By making a film I could control the order, and how long, each piece of writing was viewed. My list of 'facts' are interspersed with children playing. As the story plays out and as the radioactive distortion becomes more prominent, you hear the sound of the nuclear reactor. The noise gets louder until it begins to distort. It then cuts to silence at the climax of the film. 31 dead. The closing shot is of the Chernobyl power plant in the distance. Being filmed by somebody who has no idea of what is going on inside it (fig 19). The film is intended to create a sense of unease. Something is going on that you're not seeing. And it is left to the audience to see what is not being said.

As with the Recoverist Manifesto, the film has a serious subject. I have tried to be aware of this, so as not to make my work too frivolous. I am satisfied I have achieved this. I have used my Manifesto to tell two different stories. Both are selective in the information shown. And both are very aware of their audience. I have worked with physical objects (for the first time), graphics, writing and film (also for the first time).

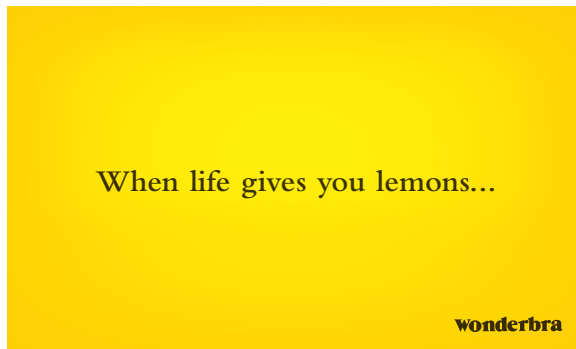


fig 20



fig 22

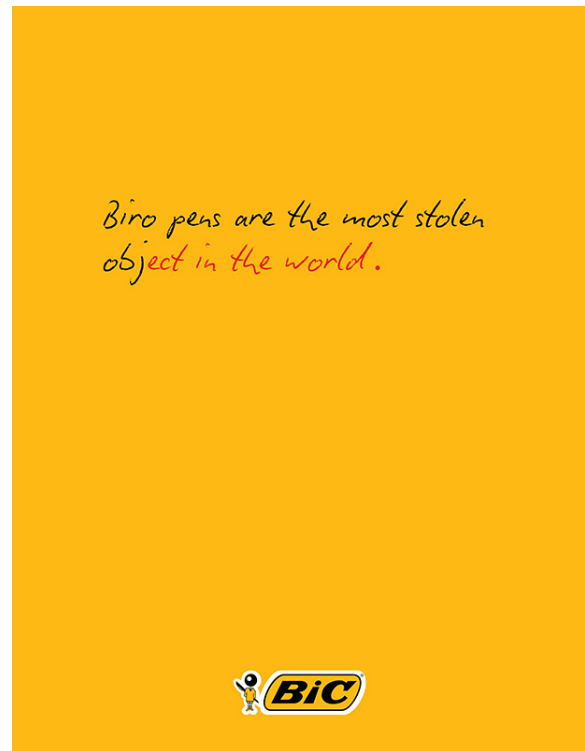


fig 21

CONCLUSIONS

My Creative Advertising students at Leeds Arts University have used my Reductionist Manifesto to help them develop advertisements. Sophie Pollard used it for Wonderbra (fig 20). Gabriel Barnard used it for Biro (fig 21). He won a Gold Clio for it in 2018 (fig 22). As more students are using the Manifesto, I am beginning to collect the work they produce. I have presented in at universities in Ravensburg, Germany and New York, USA. Later this year I am delivering it at Turku University in Finland. I aim to show this body of work along with contributions from professional designers. This could be form a publication or an exhibition. I will also continue to use the Reductionist Manifesto with my own work.

At the start of this project I considered all forms of communication to be storytelling. I haven't discovered anything to make me doubt this. I have developed a method of storytelling that puts the audience at the centre of the story. This is a technique that I will continue to develop.

But I think the next story I choose will have a happy ending.

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