

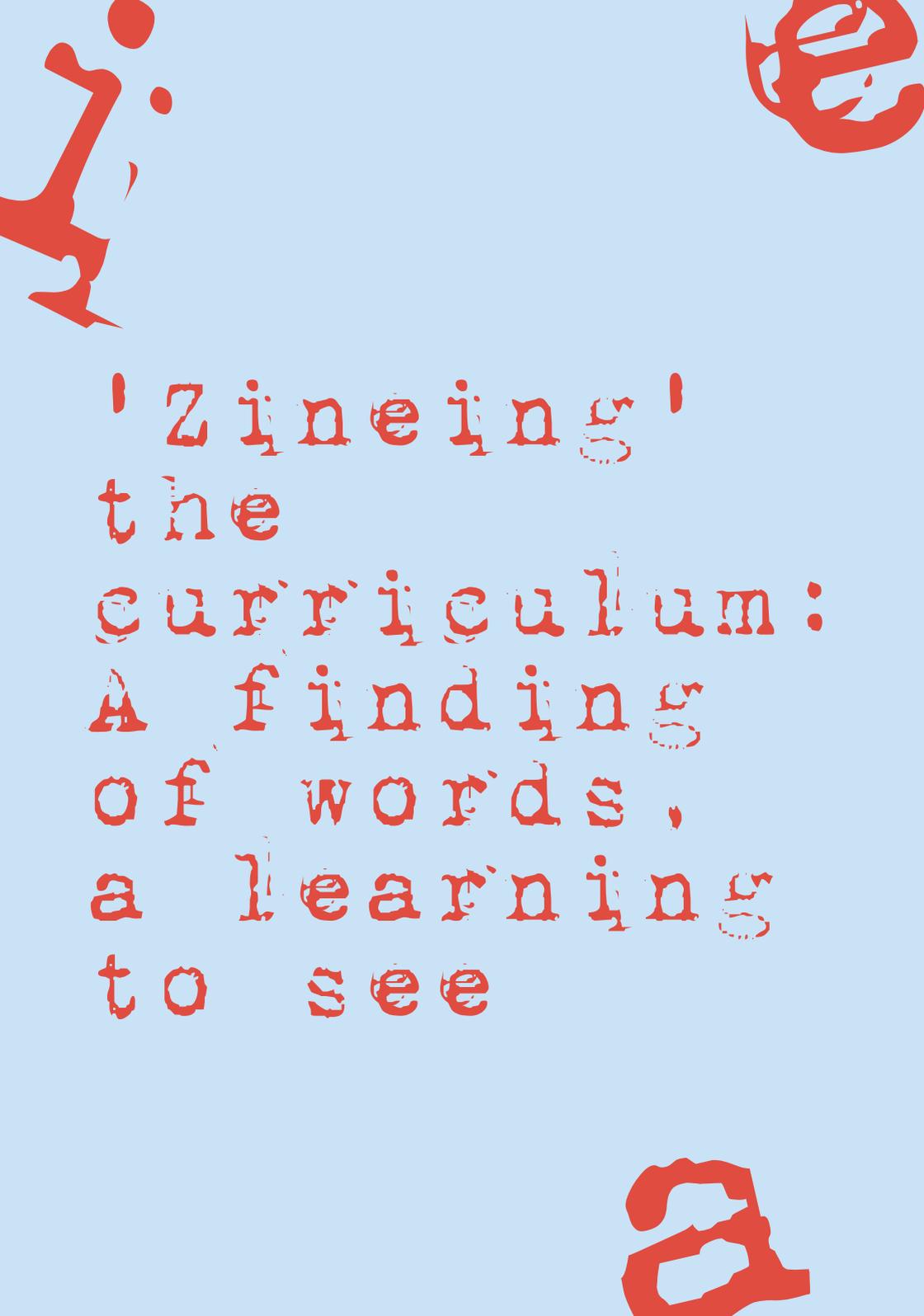
# 'ZINEING' THE CURRICULUM:

A finding of  
words,  
a learning  
to see

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'ZINEING' THE CURRICULUM: A FINDING OF WORDS, A LEARNING TO SEE

**MY INTRODUCTION  
TO ZINES:  
ZINEMAKING AS A  
MODE OF MESSAGE  
MAKING**

In the early 2000s I became exposed to zine culture through underground music. Punk bands were creating their own zines featuring interviews, album reviews, opinion pieces and often featured sections that included space for subculture-related art. I curiously collected such low budget, limited edition zines, as they offered insight into unique perspectives relating to the subculture of the local punk rock scene. This content required seeking out, and as such, zines and zine-makers offered an access point to rare information, sharing limited insights from the subculture. Accessing zines and the niche ideas they promoted thus offered perspectives on topics often at the margins of what could be considered mainstream. Such insights and ideas related to alternative modes of thinking and provided different perspectives to the status quo. By definition, zines are "self-published booklets sold cheaply or traded for other zines" (Thomas 2013:27). Most zines were limited photocopied editions and made use of affordable

(lo-fi) methods of duplication prevalent in the early-2000s. This cost-effective mode of print reproduction resulted in the featured typography and imagery often having compromised legibility due to the stark contrast caused by these lo-fi modes of printing. However, the content remained important and relevant as the featured information could not necessarily be accessed elsewhere - most importantly because, in South Africa, home-based internet access was still limited at that time. The cheap, 'blown out' visual quality that emerged as a result of the low-budget duplication process added a further sense of urgency to the content, which in turn, informed the nature of the type of visuals that were included. Manmeet Sandhu (2020:2) highlights this independent (do-it-yourself) aspect of zine culture, foregrounding that self-initiative - in terms of making, marketing, publishing and distribution - forms a critical part of zine-making. Sanhdu (2020:2) thereby positions zines as being inherently non-commercial in nature. It is this 'self-initiated' aspect of the zine-making process that positions it as a suitable learning opportunity for my Visual Communication students, and which forms part of the discussion of this essay.

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## 'ZINEING' THE CURRICULUM

When, at the start of my career as a lecturer of Illustration, I was presented with the opportunity to make revisions to the curriculum, I enthusiastically included a project on zine development as I intuited that this could inspire a meaningful and empowering learning opportunity for students. In alignment with Courtney Lee Weida (2020:267), I suspected that zine frameworks could “create distinctly personal and communal spaces for art education reflection” and that the zine format could serve as a foundation for many empowering learning outcomes for illustrators. Sandhu (2020:1) highlights that “zines [place] emphasis[s] on individual expression and creativity and usually feature illustration/drawings, photographs, typography, graphic design along with poetry, writings, prose and essays to communicate their message”. This validates the relevance that zines hold in the context of visual communication, where creating meaning through image and text is often placed at the centre. In this essay, I consider the pedagogical and creative value that zines can offer Illustration

students (and by extension, Visual Communication students) within the context of higher education. Additionally, I include reflections by Level Three Illustration students Callum Sutherland and Philisiwe Memela. Both Memela and Sutherland have completed zine projects as part of their studies and remain enthusiastic about the potential of zine practices, hence their inclusion in the essay. Sutherland and Memela also formed part of the panel discussion that preceded this publication.<sup>1</sup> In preparing for the writing of this essay, I interviewed them in order to gain insights into their first-hand experience of completing a zine project that forms part of the curriculum and in order to understand zine making practices and the value thereof from a student’s perspective. Both noted opportunities and challenges that ‘zineing’ in the curriculum presented to them during their studies and as such inform the focus of this essay. Furthermore, a broad overview of a zine project featured in the Illustration curriculum is introduced and examples of student zines are briefly discussed in order to demonstrate how zines can empower students. The zine project’s intended outcomes and limitations are also noted.

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## AN OVERVIEW: 'ZINEING' THE CURRICULUM

In the context of the Bachelor of Arts in Visual Communication Design (BAVC) degree at open Window where I teach, projects that encourage students to personally express themselves and that invite them to assert their visual identity are somewhat limited due to the more commercially aligned focus of the qualification’s programme. Projects of a more open-ended nature often set out to allow students to creatively ‘self-orientate’ and provide them with the opportunity to place fringe ideas, or something that perhaps resonates on a more personal level, at the centre of the project. The zine project presented at Level Three in the Illustration curriculum within the BAVC, offers students such an opportunity due to the open-endedness of the project’s description and parameters. This zine project encourages students to select one of a series of provided titles (which can be considered ‘cues’), challenging them to develop a

comprehensive topic in relation to the selected title. In creating a zine, they are called to develop illustrated content that visually unpacks their own topic that is formed in response to their selected title. In their exploration of the self-developed topic, the student is required to include portraiture, environments and objects in the content that must expand across a minimum of 20 pages. The rest of the zine’s execution is completely up to the student to determine. Memela (2024) confirms that the zine project affords students “freedom [regarding] what specific thing to focus on and also, where to put a pin in it”, meaning that students have great freedom in determining their topic’s focus and how this is articulated across the zine. The provided titles that students choose from and interpret include themes as broad as ‘History and its heroes’ or ‘Places I’ve never been to and people I haven’t met’. The open-endedness of these ‘cues’ allows for diverse responses and personal engagements, and lets students determine whether they want to approach their zine-making from either a personal narrative or research-based position.

<sup>1</sup> To gain insights from students that have completed a zine project at The Open Window, the institution where I lecture; I conducted a brief interview with Visual Communication students Callum Sutherland and Philisiwe Memela. These students were selected based on their interest in zine-making as a practice and as they had formed part of the roundtable discussion that took place on 10 August 2024 at the Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Arts, WAM, Wits University in conjunction with the exhibition lo-fi street cred: artists’ zines, DIY and alternative publications. My interview with Sutherland and Memela was conducted virtually on 11 November 2024.

## 'ZINEING': SELF-ORIENTATION / FORMULATING PERSPECTIVES

The zine project invites students to consider how their thoughts and ideas on the chosen cues can be presented in a meaningful and curiosity-invoking manner. Weida (2022:269) positions the term 'zineing' - referring to the act of creating zines as an illuminating practice as she (2022:268) alludes to the Native American storyteller Robin Wall Kimmerer's (2023:11) notion that "finding the words is another step in learning to see". This guides my teaching approach and, as such, the student's process should be one of clear articulation, both visually and conceptually, while the completed zine should offer readers compelling access to the underlying narratives and provide new perspectives on the topics explored. Through the students' conducted research on their topics and the grafting of this research into personal narratives, the zines must showcase nuanced ideas and visual solutions. The research might take different forms depending on the nature of their focus. Sutherland (2024) notes that determining a topic in response to provided titles for students may prove somewhat challenging, as

they have "an open stage". She (Sutherland 2024) expands on the difficulties that came with this freedom by foregrounding that in terms of the content, it allowed students to "put pieces together in this format that is [not] something 'large'", thereby highlighting the informal aspect of zine-making that underpins the self-oriented nature of the creative process.

*By introducing zine-making to the curriculum, students are called to make sense of their own creative identity. The zine-making process offers them the opportunity to consider what messages matter to them as creatives and explore how these formulated messages can be communicated with a sense of urgency. I argue that zine-making becomes a 'sense-making process' in which students are called to express a fragment of their worldview through developing a perspective that, in Kimmerer's (2023:11) terms, facilitates their "learning to see".*

The 'self-orientation' that emerges in the zine making process is achieved through content development and visual articulation, or through "putting the pieces together" as explained by Sutherland (2024).

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'Self-orientation' relates to aspects of world-building, stylistic development and storytelling, foregrounding the topic of authorship that is strongly associated with illustration and zine-making. Sandhu (2020:2) asserts that "zines provide the most personalised views on a selected theme". Creating a zine thus allows students to consider how to introduce what matters to them as a person and as a creative, thereby providing a chance to assert a sense of creative authorship and identity. Does a student opt to foreground their known identity or, instead, adopt the view of a singled-out protagonist that guides the reader, while placing their personal identity in the background? Weida (2020:273) asserts that even when "making anonymously [this] can become a strong orientating declaration of oneself, one's values and one's work purely as an artist". As such, creating a zine in the context of the curriculum can be considered creating a manifesto of sorts, and through its performative potential, zine-making can offer students a space to trial their identity as makers and creative thinkers, affording space to traverse new territory in terms of their practice.

## WORLD BUILDING: DRAWING UP CONTENT

An important aspect of zine development is considering what type of visual content best conveys a glimpse into one's personalised views on a theme. Students need to consider what they choose to show and how to best illustrate these forms in order to position their perspective. In terms of the actual zine content, Sutherland (2024) highlights that "choosing what [is] important and [determining] what are the things that will carry [...] the message" forms a critical part of the zine-making process. Relating to the content requirements of the zine project, another requirement is that the zine must feature portraiture, objects and spaces as part of the illustrated content. How these are portrayed and compositionally framed relates to the world the students are fleshing out and this, as Sutherland (2024) confirms, ultimately aids in portraying the

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message that they set out to express. Part of this world-building extends to stylistic expression. Weida (2020:275) relates this world-building in zines to sketchbook practice, noting that when creating zines, a “connection with journaling traditions and the crafting of a space that is, first and foremost, personal” exists. A part of the creator’s inner world is portrayed in the developed imagery, informing the world-building and presenting a personal perspective that is captured in the developed zine. In the discussion of the possible link that exists between zines and sketchbook practice, Memela (2024) notes that zines, similar to sketchbooks, offer creatives a more “low stakes” setting. Memela (2024) further claims that the format offers an opportunity to “quickly explore something”, foregrounding the often informal and immediate nature of zines and zine-making. Sutherland (2024) expands on this ‘low stakes’ notion, noting that zines do not need to be “perfect like a book”, meaning that the expectations around content refinement and production are different from book-making, embracing a more informal approach. This does not only relate to zine content, but also to the physical format of zines and

considerations around production which all form part of the zine-makers task.

### **THE PHYSICAL FORMAT: PRODUCTION CONSIDERATIONS**

Besides deciding on what to place at the centre stage of the zine (via. topic and content development) and how to visually articulate this (via. stylistic approach and framing of content), the zine project also invites students to consider decisions around the physical appearance of the zine, extending to DIY (do-it-yourself) production skills. As zines can be considered artefacts that engage performatively (Radway in Weida 2011:271), the appearance (texture and surface) and modes of navigating the format (binding and interactivity), are critical considerations in their completion and messaging. Decisions made regarding the physical appearance of the zine ultimately inform the reader’s experience and uptake of the presented topic and developed content. Limits of the traditional A5 zine format and how to enhance or challenge these so that they are in service of the developed message

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or content is thus a further critical consideration extending to zine-making. Despite zines’ informal nature, I note that physical craft aspects relating to the appearance of zines require consideration as they must ultimately help orient the reader within the world that is built and presented in the zine. Memela (2024) notes that the way that “someone interacts with it, [the zine], is just as important as what’s in it”. Memela (2024) states that it is important to consider “how you [the zine-maker] can use that to continue the concept”. DIY production skills are not restricted to high-end finishes, but extend to seemingly insignificant aspects, such as paper choice and deciding between binding methods.

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## EXAMPLES OF ZINE TOPICS: TWEELING (2019) BY EILEEN MARAIS

An example of a student zine which demonstrates the various aspects relating to zine-making explored above, is Eileen Marais' Tweeling (2019), named after a small, unfamiliar town in the Free State. The zine's content focuses on Marais' family hometown and its people. Through engaging in and recording snippets of conversations with family members who live in Tweeling, Marais offers a glimpse into the small town and its people, framing it through her direct lived experience. Here the marginalised is pulled into focus through making the town Tweeling the main subject of the zine.

FIG. 1.

Eileen Marais, Tweeling zine spread (2019). Digital photograph. Photograph: David Paton



FIG. 2.

Eileen Marais, Tweeling zine cover and accompanying stickers (2019). Digital photograph. Photograph: David Paton

Snippets of text featuring intimate phrases extracted from conversations and shared insights from town folk, as well as expressive illustrated content reminiscent of a sketchbook style, act as a visual record of the town. In this way Tweeling (2019) provides an access point to the town and its people, offering personal insights mediated by Marais through her illustrations and text excerpts derived from her conversations. In terms of the physical appearance of the zine, Marais chose silver paper for the cover which conceptually elevates the town and its people, signalling the importance of Tweeling in her experience of it. This demonstrates how, through the elements of zines material production, the unknown becomes celebrated and, in Weida's (2022:269) terms, zine-making is positioned as an illuminating practice. This 'celebration of the unknown' covered in the zine was further extended by Marais' development of Tweeling merchandise items such as stickers and patches. These merchandise items function to bring further visibility to Tweeling, possibly evoking curiosity about the place and its culture, using other accessible applications or formats (beyond the zine) to expand on the zine's content.

## HOW TO PISS OFF A GRAPHIC DESIGNER (2020) BY JACK SINGER

Jack Singer's How to piss off a graphic designer (2020) adopts a more playful approach as the zine outlines the mundane frustrations designers may encounter when dealing with 'know-it-all' clients.

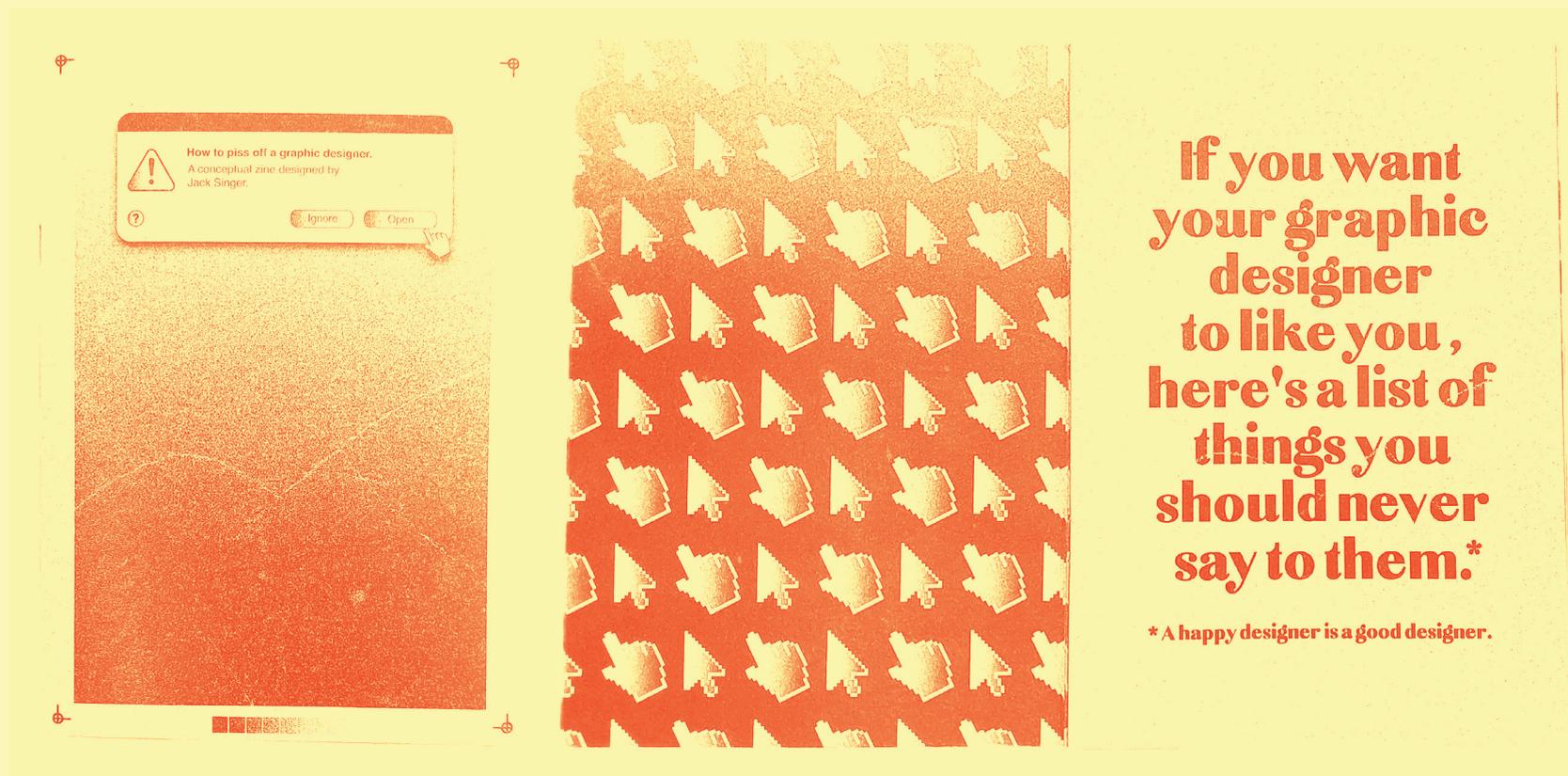
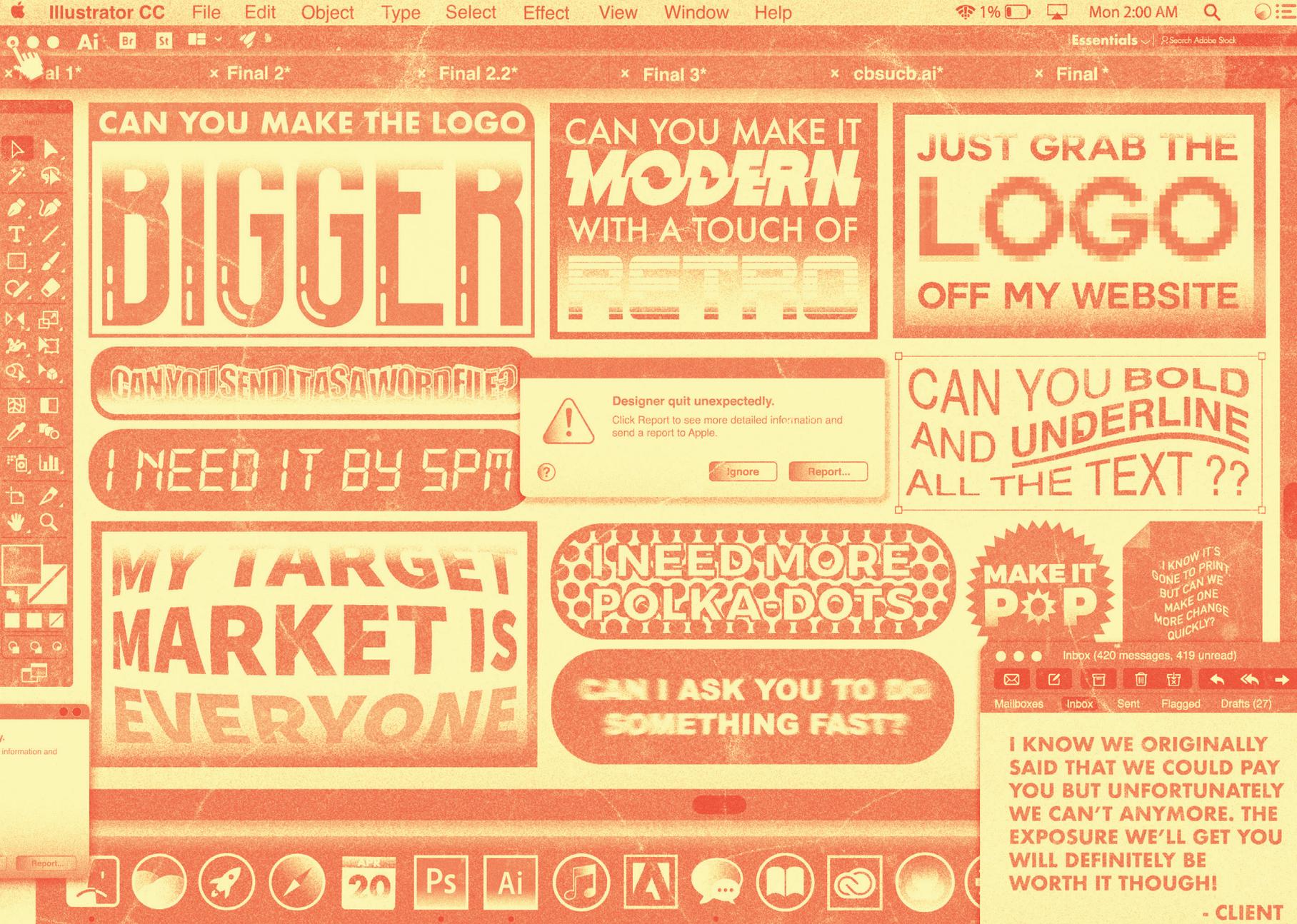


FIG. 3A&B.

Jack Singer, How to piss off a graphic designer, zine cover & spread (2020). Photographs: David Paton

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**FIG. 4.** Jack Singer, How to piss off a graphic designer, zine spread (2020). Digital image supplied by the author

The zine critically, yet playfully, introduces some stereotypical feedback and comments designers often receive from non-designer clients whilst working on a project (see Figure 4). Through the interaction of image and typography, that captures the zine's content, Singer manages to establish a tongue-in-cheek tone that affords him, as an experienced graphic designer, a space to vent and convert frustrations into something playful and entertaining. Of importance here is that the informal nature of the zine format and its potential audience offers Singer an opportunity to communicate serious issues in a playful manner in terms of the zine's content, execution and consumption. The zine content references digital spaces by including cursors and other digital tools contemporary designers make use of, creating an interesting interplay between the digital screen and the printed format, thereby highlighting the often fraught and poorly understood demands, and differences between digital and printed platforms and products, by clients.

## VARIATIONS ON A THEME: KEEPING THE STAKES LOW

When creating zines communally and alongside each other in the classroom context and responding to provided cues or titles in terms of the zine projects referenced, multiple ideas and perspectives in response to a singular topic tend to emerge from the student body. Multiple possible interpretations of a singular theme often prove valuable in terms of the learning opportunities they present. This highlights how different ideas and subjects that relate to a singular theme can be presented in vastly diverse ways and how, as a result, this can influence and diversify a reader's / viewer's understanding of a topic. I argue therefore that zine-making in the Visual Communication curriculum necessarily informs students of different modes of thinking on a topic and facilitates acceptance of diverse perspectives, which they might not have considered and with which they might not have been familiar. Such engagement with diversity and nuance encourages tolerance. Jeanne Scheper (2023:21) notes that

zine-making can be considered a "social-medium strongly linked to free-play and the possibility of creating communication across time and space and play". Such a communal view, highlights and foregrounds the illuminating and communicative value of zines. As part of zine production, Risograph printing is a frequently applied printing method. As Thomas (2015:97) notes, Risograph printing can be explained as an "automated screen printing machine that looks like a photocopier". Thomas (2015:97) foregrounds the imperfections in Risograph printing that emerge as part of the registration of the colours rarely being perfect. These imperfect alignments often result in no two prints being the same, which in turn, maintains a sense of intrigue and uniqueness. This unexpected aspect of the Risograph printing process relates to the "free-play" that Scheper (2023:21) associates with zine making, rendering Risograph printing a suitable production method.

In concluding my interview on zines in the curriculum with Sutherland and Memela (2024), I asked them to provide short phrases that effectively outline

the potential that zine-making presents them as students. Memela (2024) asserts that "zines are about exploring an idea in an undefined space [...] creating without judgement" while Sutherland (2024) states that zine-making allows the creator to retain full control of the message, making all the decisions and determining "how [they] want to show something". These statements highlight how zine-making empowers students to assert themselves by providing them with a space or platform to freely express their ideas and thoughts. Zines offer their makers the chance to draw attention to what matters to them as creatives and, ultimately, as people. As Sutherland (2024) and Memela (2024) note, the "low stakes" context within which zine-making occurs, provides a space for free, creative expression and personal self-orientation.

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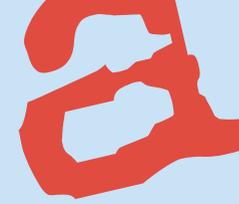
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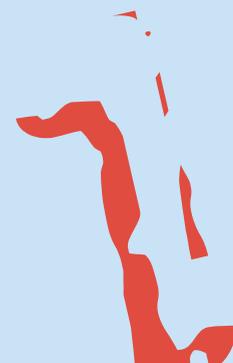
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**Maaïke Bakker** is a visual artist and illustrator working with various drawing, sculpture and installation-based mediums as well as digitally. She obtained an MTech Fine Art degree (cum laude with Chancellor's Medal, 2014) from the University of Johannesburg. Bakker's style is formed through the creation of line-based patterns and investigates the limitations imposed by systems or structures, determining at what point such systems become irrelevant and futile. Bakker is a lecturer at Open Window and a co-owner of the artist-run art space, NO END Contemporary.

**Callum Sutherland** majored in Illustration and Communication Design for her BA in Visual Communication (2023). Sutherland is currently enrolled for her BA in Visual Communication (Hons) at Open Window, where she currently also works as Printmaking Technician. Sutherland was a Loerie Award Finalist in Visual Communication with a project titled Maverix Packaging (2024).

**Philisiwe Memela** graduated with a BA in Visual Communication from Open Window (2025) where she majored in Illustration. Memela won the Open Window Creative Journey Scholarship (2021).

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