SECOND YEAR GRADUATE STUDIO

Fall 2023

CFA AR 883

Revelation Through Inquiry: Development of Thesis Research

LEVEL	MFA 2 · Graduate studio
CREDITS	8
MEETS	Section A1 Tuesdays · Section B1 Thursdays · 12:30–3:15 / 3:30–6:15
DATES	September 12 – December 8, 2023
LOCATION	[confirm]
INSTRUCTOR	Assistant Professor Nicholas Rock (he/him) · with a second instructor
OFFICE	808 Commonwealth Ave — 406A
CONTACT	nickrock@bu.edu
OFFICE HOURS	By appointment — Tuesdays and Thursdays 10:30–12:30, Wednesdays 12–2 · fantastical.app/nick-kSSb/office-hours

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Overview

The Design Thesis is more than an individual project, and while it could be very focused in terms of content and form, it is neither only one nor the other. The Thesis is a body of work, the culmination of design inquiry, research, and formal experimentation, which offer new perspectives, ideas, thoughts, and questions into the contemporary design conversation. The work developed this semester and built upon in the Spring is intended to be deep, rigorous, and intense. It, therefore, must be rooted in your values, beliefs, interests, and curiosities.

This semester will introduce opportunities to rigorously explore forms of inquiry and research, leading to broad experimentation with one's creative process while helping you get a hold of who you are, what you believe in, and what you care about in terms of content and formal issues.

Our main objective is to develop who you are as a designer while using inquiry and research as catalysts for your critical thinking and creative process. Additionally, this is a moment for you to reflect on and orient yourself to the current realities we are confronting in the world, which is the measure of a successful designer.

You will build on previous experiences and delve into unfamiliar territories. Guided by me, your peers, and outside critics, you will develop the foundation and framework of your Thesis through a series of inquiry-based projects, a formal professional presentation, and several challenging form-making assignments, culminating in a thesis abstract and semester-end reviews.

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Learning Outcomes

- Demonstrate an advanced ability to create and curate content and leverage the content for advanced experimental form-making.
- Develop the basis for a personal design methodology applicable beyond the scope of this course.
- Develop an understanding of design inquiry and how driving questions can guide the growth and development of a design project.
- Develop the ability to leverage research as a basis for design projects.
- Demonstrate an advanced ability to communicate complex concepts and creative thinking to multiple audiences through writing and visual presentation.

Program Learning Outcomes

1. Advance a unique graphic design process and master key design principles through programmatic studio work and discourse.
2. Use a unique design process to shape content applicable to multiple/myriad mediums and targeted audiences.
3. Approach design holistically — observe and respond to the social, political, economic, technological forces driving change and influencing communication formats.
4. Articulate a unique point of view and method informed by a study of design history and theory, and an engagement in contemporary practice and discourse.
5. Professionally develop through a measurable degree of advancement in creative work, research, writing, publication, and distribution.
6. Participate in the expansion, disruption, and revision of discourse and practice to represent people, cultures, and aesthetics historically excluded from Eurocentric narratives about art and design.

We define learning outcomes vis-a-vis the profession’s demands, considered in tandem with the department’s strategic vision, school, college, and university. We measure the outcomes regularly, during progress and final critiques with individual faculty, and during end-of-semester reviews with a panel of faculty and guest critics.

03

Course Structure

Class as Community

I come into this class from a place of respect and trust, and I hope that you all do too.

We are a microcosm — of the department, the school, the university, and while small, we are still an incredibly diverse community. Our cohort includes students from all over the world with all sorts of backgrounds and experiences.

Our class is inclusive and accessible — We come from different places, backgrounds, and walks of life. We embrace the unique identities of each member of this community and commit to learning, growing, and understanding each other through historical contexts of race, gender, religion, sexuality, and other expressions of self. If they feel comfortable doing so, I ask that all members of this community share their gender pronouns with the class. For more information on pronouns and why it is important for both cisgender and transgender people to state them, please visit pinkmantaray.com/resources/pronounsinbio.

I understand that your trust is earned — I am committed to helping you grow and learn and change or solidify your perspective and knowledge in design, and I am committed to learning from you. I will ensure that our class is a safe space to teach and learn, as I see all of us working in both capacities.

We will explore diverse content — I am working to ensure that this course represents a vast range of perspectives, ideas, topics, people, and cultures through what I will provide and what I hope you all will bring to the conversation. I will also strive to elevate your voices in this class through the project work and the conversation.

We will be flexible, patient, and understanding — I made a syllabus and a schedule of projects. I will shift and adjust the work and the due dates to adapt to our class. There is understandable uncertainty coming into this semester. Let's commit to the experience and see where it takes us.

Class Structure

Classes will be a mixture of mini-lectures, discussions, individual and small groups, and whole class meetings, critiques, and presentations. This semester we will have weekly full-group conversations and small group meetings, and additional outside critic meetings. We will split the class into workgroups to more easily activate small group sessions.

A Few Rules

1. Show up, and show up on time, this is a matter of respect for everyone in the community and to ensure you have everything you need to grow.
2. Engage in the conversation — we are all here to make each other better designers (and maybe even better people!)
3. Do the best you can week in and week out. We will meet you wherever you are.

4. Have fun. Make space for joy.
5. And finally, the printer is always broken.

Thesis Groups + Virtual Critics

I have organized you all into five groups of five students. You will meet with your group outside of class meetings and coordinate and conduct four sessions throughout the semester with an outside critic assigned to your group. These groups intentionally bridge both sections to ensure you have an alternate structure to see and hear from each other, thus taking advantage of the entire group so that we don't become too small and siloed. The goal is to exchange many ideas, thoughts, questions, and conversations. Our five virtual critics this semester feature two alums from our BFA program: Sarah Pratt and Mohammed Nassem; two alums from our MFA program: Regina Acra and Nicholas Samendinger; and one alum from RISD MFA, regular critic Ryan Diaz.

GROUP	CRITIC
Group 01	Sarah Pratt
Group 02	Ryan Diaz
Group 03	Mohammed Nassem
Group 04	Regina Acra
Group 05	Nicholas Samendinger

Approach to the Semester

Form. This semester will include two experimental form-making projects parallel to the broader inquiry and thesis development work. These projects will keep you making experimental forms and express ideas related to your thesis work (or not) that appear along the way. We will ask you to begin aligning and organizing yourself in relation to what interests and influences you. You will develop a more profound sense of your own identity as a designer and be better able to frame questions and lines of inquiry on your own.

Inquiry. We will work through three distinct but complementary forms of inquiry that are intentionally sequential, the first building a foundation for the second, providing you with the basis and context necessary for the third. Each requires a deliverable — a designed research document of sorts. You may choose what format this takes within some guidelines. You should see it as an asset to use and build upon, something you can refer back to, and something that can inform someone who has no idea about your work. We will ask that you begin to fully develop a coherent perspective on both the visual and verbal languages you utilize to discover and articulate your thesis while

continually questioning design as it relates to your view and values. Synthesize, connect the dots, draw connections, compile insights, and begin to apply your thinking.

Form + Inquiry. Using content and insights from the form-making and inquiry processes, you will work on two projects combining form and inquiry. You will catalog and analyze what you have made, collected, saved, archived, or bookmarked to date. And begin to look for the appearance of formal strategies or ideas that are the threads or connections between everything. These will inform the foundational direction of your thesis work.

04

Projects

00 — Thesis Journal

Individual · weekly, prompted through Basecamp

What things have you found or looked at, or thought of this week? — something you want to do next, what inspired you, what did you hate — or maybe: my thesis is _ _ fill in the blank (a series of projects exploring x; an exploration of space; rebranding gender, etc.).

01 Form — Remix

Individual · 3 weeks · begins Sep 12/14 · due Oct 3/5

A formal project about recontextualizing content, ideas, and form. This project is meant to be an experimental testing ground of ideas. It may or may not relate at all to your thesis work. It may or may not be a spectacular failure.

Deliverable: TBD.

02 Inquiry — Filter of Perspective

Individual · 5 weeks · begins Sep 12/14 · due Oct 17/19

Develop a content-specific cultural landscape; begin by cataloging, and analyzing what you have made to date, then expand your search to references and inspiration that you already know. Things you have saved and bookmarked, notes you've taken, lists you've made, etc., anything you have collected, saved, archived, or bookmarked. This project is not just visual inspiration. You must include text-based (written or spoken) content, issues, points of view, or values that are important to you, that you live by, or that define your identity. Include reference points such as links to articles or videos, for example. What is your reading list, your bookmarks, your playlists?

What formal strategies, themes, or ideas appear? Look for the threads or connections between everything. Try to extract three to five and define each of these in your own

words. Can you use these strategies, themes, or ideas as filters for discovering new content reference points?

The resulting collection is your content-specific cultural landscape. Determine and design the best format for cataloging and presenting this cultural landscape.

> “A catalog — generally refers to a more comprehensive and descriptive list or inventory of items. It provides detailed information about each item, such as descriptions, attributes, categories, and possibly images. In the context of a website or printed publication, a catalog would offer a broader view of the available resources, including additional context and metadata.”

Deliverable: You should choose 1 of 2 formats — either a web-based catalog, or a print-based catalog. Either way, your catalog should be designed in such a way that you are able to add to, and update it with new information through the next year and beyond. This is something you will design based upon your content and needs, but a default system or framework is not acceptable for a final deliverable (Google Sheets for example).

How to get started: For our first week of class, prepare to present a collection of design inspiration and important references alongside other significant examples of reference, inspiration and content that have historically shaped who you are as a creative person.

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03 Form + Inquiry — Design Inquiry Presentation

Individual · 4 weeks · begins Sep 19/21 · presented Oct 17, 18, 19

You will see threads of ideas and interesting connections in your Filter of Perspective project. What insights can you extract from this work? Try to define three to five in your own words and consider how these might form an initial foundation of your thesis research. Across three evenings of presentations, you will formally deliver a public talk concerning the insights you have drawn from your Summer Letter through the Filter of Perspective project. You will write a script and design a set of accompanying visuals. You will present this in person in front of your peers and an online audience.

Deliverable: Written script and designed digital presentation · performed presentation to a public audience (randomly assigned presentation times).

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04 Form — Extreme Scale

Individual · 3 weeks · begins Oct 24/26 · due Nov 14/16

A project about shifting understanding and perspective. This is your second project meant to be an experimental testing ground of ideas. It may or may not relate at all to

your thesis work. It may or may not be a spectacular failure.

Deliverable: TBD.

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05 Inquiry — 50 Questions

Individual · 3 weeks (4 weeks, but 1 is Design Week) · begins Oct 3/5

You will begin to develop a research methodology based on conceptual and formal questions as a design process for this project. You will research and explore new content by creatives, authors, thought leaders, and others within and outside design to help develop internal and external questions as practicing designers.

Deliverable: Printed poster.

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06 Form + Inquiry — Taxonomy + Methods

Individual · 4 weeks (5 weeks, but 1 is Thanksgiving recess) · begins Oct 31 / Nov 2 · due Nov 28/30

How can you begin to define your thesis idea and frame its references in a language we understand? Begin to develop a taxonomy of the language and terminology that emerged from the semester's beginning. It would be best if you additionally defined or described this terminology. Support this taxonomy with references, such as links, examples, or case studies. As a further evolution of the insights from your previous projects create a statement or series of ideas, or methods that can begin to link, connect, or unify your taxonomy. How might you visualize your taxonomy as a piece of information design?

Deliverable: Visualize your Taxonomy + Methods · write a project brief informed by the T+M · complete the project brief.

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07 Inquiry — Abstract

Individual · 4 weeks · begins Nov 14/16 · due Dec 8, final reviews

You will form the basis of your thesis ideas in the form of a written research document called an abstract. This document is generally a synopsis of ideas specific to your thesis body of work. "An abstract succinctly articulates an original contribution to the current state of knowledge in a specified field by explaining how the work overturns, challenges, inflects, advances, or confirms that field's current wisdom on that subject." We will use a framework from Design Incubation to shape your thesis abstracts in preparation for the Spring semester.

Deliverable: Written, designed 300-word abstract · single, letter-sized sheet, printed and digital.

05

Assessment

Evaluation Criteria

Engagement. A class as a community depends on the engagement of the class members. Part of a designer's job is communicating effectively, on a design team, in a studio environment, or with clients. We ask that you attempt to be an active class member, particularly during critiques, as all feedback is valuable and essential. Discussion is a significant part of the design process. We want to ensure everyone has the opportunity to have their voices heard.

Designers rarely work independently. Completed work is almost always the result of a team or collaborative effort of some sort, whether it be with other designers, clients, developers, writers, etc. There will be times when you will need to work as part of a collaborative group in this class. My goal is to be flexible and accommodating, but you are required to attend class meetings. If you cannot participate in a class for some reason, don't hesitate to contact your faculty in advance to ensure you stay connected with the community discussion.

Time in the studio environment is crucial. Class discussion and critique are things not easily made up and happen regularly, and we will try to offer you multiple perspectives to help guide your work.

Project Execution. All of the projects in this course require your full attention and effort. Projects must be submitted on time and completed according to the project brief. We will have a review after each project, though you will not receive an individual grade for each project. You will have an opportunity to improve upon each project following that project's final critique.

Project Process. You should document the process of each of your projects throughout the semester. Save all sketches, writings, mockups, etc. Your documents will be given the same attention to detail as your design work. The process for each project will make up a portion of your grade.

Professionalism. As you develop into design professionals, you must practice how you conduct and carry yourself in interactions with clients, employers, peers, etc. Pay attention to emails you send, things you say in class. Practice humility, honesty, transparency and respect.

06

Calendar

DATES (TUE / THU)	PROJECT
Sep 12/14 – Oct 3/5	01 Form — Remix
Sep 12/14 – Oct 17/19	02 Inquiry — Filter of Perspective
Sep 19/21 – Oct 17, 18, 19	03 Form + Inquiry — Design Inquiry Presentation
Oct 3/5 – late Nov	05 Inquiry — 50 Questions

DATES (TUE / THU)	PROJECT
Oct 24/26 – Nov 14/16	04 Form — Extreme Scale
Oct 31 / Nov 2 – Nov 28/30	06 Form + Inquiry — Taxonomy + Methods
Nov 14/16 – Dec 8	07 Inquiry — Abstract · final reviews

07

Materials & Tools

Basic design kit for you to function in the class. This is my basic list. If you are a nerd about what tech and supplies people use, check out usesthis.com.

The Essentials

- Laptop
- Flash drive
- Camera
- Sketchbook
- X-Acto knife + extra blades
- Bone folder
- A flatfile drawer
- A sense of humor

Recommended

- Music
- Coffee, tea, water or other sustenance is welcome here
- A projector adapter
- A tripod
- Gaffer tape
- Bookbinding materials

Reading

- Required: *Decolonizing Reader (resources)*, collaborative open edition.
- Suggested: Monteiro, Mike. *Ruined by Design: How Designers Destroyed the World, and What We Can Do to Fix It.*

Software + Services

You will need access to Adobe Creative Cloud if you don't already. I don't expect this to be an issue, but I wanted to be sure. It is obnoxious that our industry relies on prohibitively expensive design software from one giant corporation, so I encourage you to explore alternatives to Adobe software. Experiment with something new. Here are some excellent tools: Keynote, Pixelmator, Sketch, Procreate, Cinema4d, Figma, Miro.

As you already know, we are using a project management tool used by professionals in the design industry called Basecamp to consolidate class communications. This tool will act as a central portal for class discussion outside of class and a digital library of class resources, such as this syllabus, project briefs, specific readings, and our class calendar.

You MUST have a backup solution in place after the first week. I recommend Backblaze.

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Policies

Attendance & Absences

Please make every effort to arrive punctually. You must attend all classes. According to the SVA Attendance Policy, unless specific permission for absence is arranged with the instructor of this course, students must attend class to receive credit for the course. Unexcused absences exceeding 1/4 of the total class hours in a given semester are considered excessive in all SVA courses. Tardiness and any unexcused absences will reduce your course grade. Three unexcused absences will earn you a failing grade for the course.

Academic Conduct Statement

Academic Conduct Code: bu.edu/academics/policies/academic-conduct-code

DEI Statement

As artists, designers, and educators, BU CFA School of Visual Arts values honesty, brave conversation, intellectual engagement and informed artistic freedom. We ask our community to recognize individual responsibility for actions, including the fact that impact on others may differ from intent. As an artistic community and as expressed in the BU Diversity Statement, SVA strives to be inclusive of all community members in regard to race, ethnicity, national origin, immigration status, gender and gender identity, sexuality, class, ability, and religion. We also commit to the importance of treating each student as an individual with intersectional, personal, lived experiences.

Questioning assumptions is vital to our work as educators, artists and designers. In our teaching and conversations, we will not assume any individual represents a larger group. We seek ways to connect our work with the Center for Antiracist Research at BU, and commit to being an antiracist school. We recognize that structural, systemic forms of oppression have impacted particular students more than others. We strive to be responsive and action-oriented when evaluating the impact of our own policies. We also acknowledge the time, work and commitment of resources it takes to make well-constructed plans that provide equitable benefit to students, faculty, staff and alumni in the longer term. We seek to provide the highest quality education for incoming and current students along with strong support systems so that they are able to do their best work.

In our courses, lecture series, exhibitions and library, SVA values and is attentive to the importance of showing, discussing, and including artists, designers, and writers who represent people, cultures, and aesthetics historically excluded from Eurocentric narratives about art and design.