



Visible Language

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The Tacit Exhibition

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Halldór Björn Halldórsson

Abstract

This article presents the Tacit exhibition, which formed the final part of a PhD thesis in graphic design, defended in June 2022. Building on the thesis' theme of knowledge externalization in graphic design, the exhibition was an experimental approach toward knowledge dissemination – an attempt to engage an audience otherwise not exposed to research within the field and to explore alternative ways of sharing research outcomes. The exhibition was a design study in itself and could be defined as a participatory study, as the author was present throughout the exhibition, interacting with visitors and simultaneously gathering material about the experience of the exhibition. The article presents the methodology behind the exhibition, its contents, and the outcomes of the project.

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Keywords

Typography
Exhibition Design
Design Knowledge

Background

The Tacit exhibition represented the final study of this author's doctoral thesis, "Tacit: A research journey into the methods, processes and knowledge of graphic designers" (Halldórsson, 2022). The thesis was focused on tacit, experiential knowledge within graphic design and how that knowledge may be externalized and made more communicable. Composed of three studies, the thesis explored different methods to this end, an interview study, a participatory design study, and finally, the exhibition. The first two studies demonstrated that even though graphic design knowledge is largely tacit and experiential, it is possible to externalize that knowledge through interviews and design process documentation. But the outcomes also showed that graphic designers think visually, and when given the choice, they will present processes visually rather than in words.

Experiential knowledge has traditionally not been valued within research in the same way as propositional knowledge. In recent years, there has nevertheless been a growing interest in the use of studio- or practice-based research methods, with more established research fields embracing methods more common to the arts and design. The way to present knowledge generated through such research, however, has remained unclear, as Niedderer (2021) pointed out. Some researchers within art and design have deemed traditional publishing methods inadequate, but exploring alternative ways of knowledge dissemination has in turn often been criticized due to lack of purpose and clarity. In my own research, I have attempted to show that it is possible to externalize graphic design knowledge not only using images but in words as well – something that has rarely been done within the field. At the same time, I am painfully aware of the fact that such written accounts will not be considered accessible by everyone. I therefore chose to explore alternative means of expanding the reach of my work, while simultaneously endeavoring to raise the profile of research within graphic design. To that end, I decided to hold an exhibition.

The presentation of results in the form of posters is common at seminars and conferences, which of course is a form of exhibition – albeit a somewhat constrained and regulated one. I designed my exhibition with a single theme and used my own artefacts. My exhibition was restricted to the presentation of the outcome of my research and as such it was more related to an exhibit of art or design objects in a museum setting. Considering the exhibition form's long-standing role in the creative arts, I saw in it the potential to gain the attention of those who would otherwise not be aware of design research. There has not been much research done on the use of exhibitions as tools for research, but exhibitions have obviously long been a fixture within design, art, and craft for presentation,

inspiration, and knowledge dissemination. Architecture has a long history of planning exhibitions, which are used to inform and engage stakeholders, involve community members in the development of residential areas, and better understand local aspects such as culture or geography (Nakajima, 2021). Niedderer et al. (2006) used the existence of ineffable knowledge as an argument for the use of artefacts as submitted material in practice-based research, thereby accepting the artefact as the communicator of research outcomes. Biggs (2004) saw a need for the design community to develop and defend the use of artefacts (works of music, physical objects, performances, etc.) as a method of knowledge dissemination for design research outcomes, defining these as the tools of choice of design professionals and thereby logical to use for research in the field. In my efforts to bring experiential knowledge in graphic design to light, I have demonstrated that it is in fact possible to verbally communicate the knowledge at play in a design process. Keeping in mind the visual nature of graphic design cognition, I wanted to explore presenting design results in another manner than text.

On the subject of publishing research outcomes, the Swedish Research Council (2017) stated that "only if the results are made public does the research conducted contribute effectively to the dissemination of new knowledge to the wider society" (p. 52). In more established research areas where the abundance of publications can be overwhelming, the aims and purposes of research have sometimes been questioned, with researchers wondering who and what it is for (Burawoy, 2005). Assuming that one answer to those questions is the development of the profession's knowledge, it seems pertinent to also consider how research outcomes could be presented in such a way that this new knowledge could be shared with practitioners. In budding fields of research, such as graphic design, it is paramount to shine a light on any research effort simply to make it known that research is being done within the field. Right from the start, the exhibition was planned in such a way that it could be adapted to different locales to facilitate reaching a larger audience. I chose to design the exhibition as an auxiliary manner of presenting my research, a complement to the text-based thesis, and an attempt to accommodate as well as illustrate a key outcome of my research, i.e., the visual nature of graphic designers' accounts of their design processes.

I therefore consider the exhibition an alternate way to answer the research question of whether it is possible to externalize tacit knowledge in graphic design. Visitors obviously experience exhibitions in their own ways, but I wanted to explore the possibilities of engaging an audience that otherwise would not come in contact with design research. The exhibition thus offered an opportunity to express both my personal experiences of research and the generated outcomes of it. For me personally, this became both a knowledge dissemination method and a chance to present graphic design in an unusual setting.

Being fully aware of the similarities with an artistic project, I have not chosen to describe the exhibition as “artistic” for a few reasons. First, even though “design research” is an unclear concept, “artistic research” is even more so. While there is a consensus on knowledge creation being the aim of artistic research, Ehn (2012) emphasized that an artist’s willingness to explore unusual topics in a playful manner could be a beneficial approach within scientific research as well. Taking a step further, Butt (2017) claimed that “the role of science as the organizing paradigm for knowledge must be displaced” (p. 86), where artistic research could be considered an alternative to more traditional forms of knowledge creation. A more pragmatic stance was presented by Haarman (2019), who stated that artistic research should not be compared with scientific research, but rather performed and focused on the practices and methods of the artists themselves. There are obvious similarities between my own work and artistic research, but my hesitation to use the term “artistic” stems from the fact that I do not consider myself to be an artist. The exhibition is certainly an interpretation of my research, but in my mind, it was in essence a design task – one with an intended audience, although a not-very-defined one at that. I therefore contend that my work on the exhibition is a design research project and that the use of an exhibition is one of my research methods.

Exhibition Methodology

Compared to conventional research projects, new challenges emerge when it comes to the use of exhibitions as a research method. In addition to economical and temporal restraints, the accessibility and reach of an exhibition will inevitably be restricted due to the confinements of a specific location. Additionally, creating permanent records of exhibitions poses different challenges, compared to the relatively straightforward ways of documenting more traditional research projects (Rust & Robertson, 2003). In the case of my own exhibition, it was intended as a complement to my written thesis and as such, aimed at generating interest and discussion, although limited in time and public reach. My approach can be regarded in relation to the work of Chamberlain and Yoxall (2012), where they consider the opportunities of using an exhibition as a platform for discussion on an academic level and do so with a historical reference to 17th century France and Italy, where the tradition of exhibitions in private “salons” was a forum for the exchange of ideas and knowledge, as well as for academic discussion. Modern society obviously offers a variety of such forums, but this 17th century reference is interesting.

The exhibition format tends to be very unidirectional in the sense that it is a place of observation where visitors are confronted with artefacts and information without a required, explicit response or reaction, as opposed to the salons where discussion and debate were encouraged. Niedderer et al. (2006) argued that since design artefacts require interpretation by the viewer, they can therefore be used as vehicles for conveying knowledge that has been obtained through research. Such dissemination of knowledge will inevitably make it more difficult to assess its worth, at least compared to the evaluation of text. In an effort to address that problem, Biggs (2003) highlighted the importance of context in the interpretation of knowledge that is embedded in artefacts (products), and Niedderer et al. (2006) proposed the use of new semantics in an effort to direct the interpretation of artefacts, thereby aiding in the design of an exhibition where knowledge is conveyed in a controlled manner as opposed to being only reliant on the individual visitor’s interpretation. Seeing a distinction between “contextual” and “aesthetic” exhibitions, Vergo (1989) pointed out that whereas the former provides defining, explicatory information intended to define and direct the visitor’s experience, the latter consciously omits such information and thereby encourages the observer’s interpretation in order to convey knowledge. Accepting this distinction, it would seem that a contextual exhibition would be the preferred alternative if the aim were to be accepted as a form of knowledge dissemination for research, as it (potentially) controls the observer’s understanding of its contents. However, it remains unclear what the nature of an exhibition’s context should be and how it should be communicated. The use of a text-based approach is certainly conceivable to provide detailed information about the artefacts and their background, but the use of a nonverbal method is also an option. In their work, Niedderer et al. (2022) studied a variety of options and sought inspiration from gestalt theory (Koffka, 1999), where ordering, repetition, and juxtaposition are seen to be tools to build a semantic groundwork that will aid the observer’s interpretation and understanding of exhibited work.

As already stated, the intention of my own exhibition was twofold: to extend the reach of my research and serve as an interpretation of my thesis using nonverbal means. To fulfill that intention, I had to take into consideration the different approaches presented above. Making an analogy to the world of music, we might compare visiting an exhibition to attending a concert, where music aficionados are often knowledgeable about the music and the performers beforehand. In the world of classical music, concertgoers might, for example, have read composer biographies and be familiar with the characteristics of different periods of music history. The realm of fine art places perhaps even more importance on the knowledge of history and culture, sometimes to the extent of such prerequisites preventing novices from being able to understand and enjoy the exhibited work. Dutton (2009) pointed out that “some kind of critical

language for judgment and appreciation” always exists in relation to artistic expression, a language that in effect can erect a barrier of exclusion to those who do not speak it. In my mind, this directly relates to the definition of professional knowledge within a field and what role that plays for practitioners and clients. The fact that design knowledge is, to a large extent, tacit and thereby hidden in nature represents a risk that a divide can be created both between clients and designers and between peers, hindering the exchange of experience as well as the judgment and appreciation of design outcomes. Nevertheless, and maybe conversely, the object of any design solution is to solve an existing problem – perhaps the communication of a message or the development of services or products – and in any case, the intended user should not need any experience or information to use the design solution. Therefore, defining my research outcomes as a design artefact, I wanted to design the exhibition as such, thereby allowing visitors to interpret its contents on their own terms, based on their own knowledge and experience. It therefore felt more in keeping with a design project to avoid “assisting” observers in their experience of the exhibited artefacts beyond providing brief background information on the research. The omission of textual information was intentional and aimed to further strengthen the contrast between the verbal thesis and the visual nature of graphic design.

Exhibition Design

Having decided upon an experiential approach in the design of my exhibition, I did not want to create a solution that was made for a specific locale, but rather to design a dynamic outcome that could be adapted through the use of movable and reusable artefacts intended for a contained space. Even though graphic designers mainly work with two-dimensional designs, their work has traditionally been published in three-dimensional media that the user interacts with – namely newspapers, magazines or books. I felt that this fact could be used in the exhibition to represent the contrast between experiential and theoretical knowledge by creating material, three-dimensional versions of glyphs from a typeface that I designed as part of my main PhD study. Through the tactility and physicality of these letters, observers would be allowed to experience graphic design artefacts in an unusual way, conceivably instilling in them a sense of contrast between the way they usually interact with typefaces and the “realness” of the physical letters. The “materialization” of the typeface would enhance this sense, having been designed digitally but finalized in physical forms.

The name of both my thesis and the typeface is “Tacit” (meaning expressed or carried on without words or speech

(Merriam-Webster 2022)), referring to the experiential knowledge of graphic designers. The five glyphs that form Tacit were also the basis of the exhibition, represented in oversize two- and three-dimensional versions that challenged the way we usually experience graphic design. This allowed visitors to engage with the typographical shapes as they would with sculptures, or perhaps another living being. The design of the letters was rendered more approachable to elicit an alternative visual experience and scrutiny than in the case of observing two-dimensional shapes in smaller sizes. The glyphs were made of different materials with the aim of initiating a sense of craft and of raw materials. I used transparent, opaque, hollow, and solid forms to suggest the myriad ways of dealing with design problems and the challenge of choosing suitable forms to materialize an idea. Fixed typographical illustrations mounted on two adjacent walls accompanied the large letters, and photographs showing both digital and analog design processes were projected on a third wall. These images were submitted by participants in my main PhD study as well as by myself, and their inclusion in the exhibition was intended to prompt the recollection of work processes among visitors, potentially even eliciting thoughts of physicality, idea development, and the choice of appropriate techniques and tools. Both the static illustrations and the slideshow were intended to generate a two-dimensional counterpoint to the letters on the floor, both visually and informatively, thereby opening up the visitor’s experience of the artefacts. Each observer’s interpretation of the exhibition is nevertheless the central factor in that experience, regardless of background and knowledge. The exhibition can in this way be compared to the experience of any graphic design project, as regardless of our ambition, as designers, we can never fully know the minds of our intended audience and our work will therefore always rely on interpretations we cannot foresee.

Seeking to bring visitors beyond the simple act of regarding the artefacts, I used two elements that were intended to engage participation and perhaps give rise to thoughts on what it is that inspires and where inspiration can come from. First, one of the glyphs, a lowercase “t” cut out from white cardboard, was intended for visitors to draw or sketch on at will with permanent markers. Second, a dimension of sound was added by placing a loudspeaker behind the opaque, lowercase “a.” I made a recording of myself practicing my trombone and played it through the speaker, with the intent of highlighting how seemingly unrelated activities are often a source of inspiration and are consequently integral to the solution of a design task. The aim of these elements of the exhibition was to inspire reflection on different creative approaches and how the act of sketching (practicing, experimenting) is not an aesthetic endeavour, but rather an exploration that can ultimately generate new ideas. Since I intended to be present at the museum throughout the exhibition, I also saw these interactive artefacts as tools for initiating conversation with visitors.

The following pages show images from the exhibition, and include descriptions of each of its elements.

Figure 1.
An overview of the different elements of the exhibition:

1.
Design elements from the digital development of the Tacit typeface (left) and the full Tacit Medium font (right) were printed on cloth and mounted on the side walls.
2.
A free-standing lower case "t," made of sheet metal. Dimensions (H x W x D in mm): 1700 x 900 x 400.
3.
A lower case "a," made from lacquered polystyrene. A loudspeaker behind it played soft trombone music. Dimensions (H x W x D in mm): 1200 x 900 x 400.
4.
A lower case "c" made from translucent PVC. Dimensions (H x W x D in mm): 1200 x 900 x 400.
5.
Wall projection showing images of sketches and analog methods used in my own design process and those of participants in Study II.
6.
A lower case "i," positioned as a vinyl decal on the floor. Dimensions: (H x W in mm): 500 x 2000)
7.
A lower case "t" made out of thick cardboard. It was mounted in a floor stand for visitors to write or sketch on.



Figure 2.
**The sheet metal lower
case “t”**

The hollow shape of the lower case “t” is intended to evoke a feeling of emptiness inspired by “a hole in my heart,” which is how the author described the experience of working digitally without seeing the physical results of the work.

The letter is made of sheet metal. As the metalwork was beyond my capabilities the artefact was shaped and hand-built by a professional metalworker.

The choice of material thus represents the contrast between industry and craft, mirroring in part the topic of my PhD thesis. The surface finish of the metal is deliberately left quite rough to enhance the sense of the handmade.



Figure 3.
**The opaque polystyrene
lower case “a”**

Adjacent to the hollow “t,” the lower case “a” appears more solid and closed, in a way that is reminiscent of the somewhat hidden world of design, shrouded in mystery and uncertain methods.

The clean, blank shape contrasts with the more industrial nature of the metal “t,” hinting at the flawlessness that is often the hallmark of digital methods. However, as is often the case with digital tools, the interior hides a surprise:

a loudspeaker was placed behind it, playing a recording that I made of myself practicing my trombone, complete with mistakes and repetitions; this suggests how often surprising elements can inspire and influence the design process.



Figure 4.
**The translucent PVC lower
case “c”**

The see-through appearance of the lower case “c” was intended to suggest the sometimes-invisible nature of graphic design and to illustrate the objective of my work – namely, to make graphic design knowledge more visible and less opaque.

Building the letter out of translucent PVC also suggests an effort to “look inside” design, to study it in a way that opens up and visualizes that which hitherto has remained unsaid, tacit.

The production of the letter represented one step further away from the handmade because its different segments were created using a CNC cutter and then assembled by hand.



Figure 5.
The vinyl lower case “i”

Just like much of the typography and graphic design that surrounds us, the vinyl floor decal may not be immediately discovered by visitors, and even overlooked by many.

Having seen it, though, they may realize that it interplays with the three-dimensional letters, playing its part in forming a word, just like any other letter in any piece of graphic design. Inconspicuous, overlooked and even neglected – such is often the fate of type.



Figure 6.
**The white cardboard lower
case “t”**

Introducing an element of interactivity to the exhibition, this two-dimensional letter is made of white cardboard and observers were encouraged to draw, sketch, or design on it at their own discretion.

Placed upright on the floor, the cardboard “t” had the role of representing the handmade processes of the research study, allowing visitors to explore their own creativity and experimentality.

Being flat and mounted upright, the letter also represents the most “conventional” way of experiencing type, and its position at the edge of the exhibition area provided a certain closure to the whole experience.



Reflections On The Exhibition Outcomes

Challenges

Several obstacles had to be tackled during the exhibition design work. Having decided upon the use of oversize, three-dimensional glyphs, I explored various ways of realizing these in material form. Initially I planned to build the glyphs myself, but this proved to be beyond my craft skills, especially as I wanted the artefacts to be made from several different materials. Through contacts with acquaintances in the advertising industry I was referred to companies that manufacture signage, light boxes, and other such forms of brand-building materials. I was unable to find a company that could manufacture all the different elements of my exhibition, so four of the glyphs were made by one company, whereas the printed, wall-mounted textiles and one of the glyphs were made by another. The process of contacting manufacturers, reviewing offers and following up on production was time consuming, but the project was met with interest and enthusiasm – which, in turn, inspired me.

Cost of production was obviously a big factor, something that had to be taken into consideration when it came to the choice of materials and shapes. A grant from my institution allowed me to realize the ideas I wanted to pursue, but economic hurdles will inevitably often stand in the way of using an exhibition in a research project. However, if this is planned right from the beginning when seeking funding, the inclusion of an exhibition in the design of a research project should be quite feasible. As demonstrated here, the opportunities for inclusion and knowledge dissemination are very tangible when exhibitions are used alongside more conventional methods of research. I believe my work supports the further exploration of exhibitions as research tools, with benefits for both researchers and for the generation of knowledge.

Finally, an exhibition needs somewhere to be held, the physical space in which to be set up. The choice of locale proved to be a more challenging factor than I had anticipated, both in terms of space and accessibility. Here the constraints are varied; museums usually plan their schedules years in advance, so it is hard to get into the bigger ones at short notice. The cost of renting a privately owned gallery is usually exorbitant and thus out of reach for a PhD candidate. Setting up an exhibition in available spaces that do not have previous associations with art or design can make it hard to raise attention. All these factors made finding a suitable locale somewhat challenging. However, the search was facilitated by the fact that my exhibition was designed in a way that made it readily adaptable to different locales. My thesis defense exhibition was held at The Museum of Furniture Studies in Stockholm, Sweden, a venue that, sadly, has had to cease

operation. The museum's primary focus was on furniture design rather than graphic design, but my exhibition's three-dimensional nature did nevertheless fit well with the materiality of the museum's other displays. Further, the museum's theme provided a venue that was fitting for the subject of my work. The museum was situated somewhat out of the way, which did affect its exposure to the usual clientele of such establishments and thereby, the number of visitors.

Interactions with visitors

So, did the exhibition prove to be a useful tool for knowledge dissemination? To answer that question, it is important to first consider the difference in exposure between my PhD thesis and the exhibition. At the time of writing (May 2023), my thesis has been downloaded 236 times since it was published in June 2022. It is of course impossible to know if those who downloaded the thesis have read it or not but in terms of the exhibition, it is very possible to know if the visitors were introduced to the research outcomes to any extent. The total number of visitors was not immense given time restraints (i.e., the number of days the exhibition was open). All in all, over a period of a little less than three weeks, the exhibition was open for seven days, six hours each day. In that time, a total of 112 visitors came to the museum, staying on average for 2,1 hours.

It is important to point out that the museum's permanent exhibits were on display at the same time, which meant that some visitors were not aware of my exhibition before their visit. I was present at the museum every day throughout the period that the exhibition was open. Out of the 112 guests, I personally interacted with 74 of them; these interactions ranged from short exchanges of words and introductions to the work to longer discussions about graphic design in general and design research in particular. Most visitors that I spoke with were not familiar with research in the field of graphic design beforehand (78%); however, most were interested in design in one way or other. Several were active designers themselves and commented on the value of research within the creative, applied arts. Out of the 74 guests I talked to, 16 of them asked for a copy of my thesis, which they otherwise most likely would not have encountered. These interactions opened up the possibility of discussing both the contents of my exhibition and the research work behind it. Visitors were interested in practical matters, such as the production and material choices of the exhibits, as well as the theory, methods, and outcomes of my research. The discussion would often dwell on the subject of tacit, experiential knowledge and it was clear that many could relate to that in terms of their own professional experience, with people from as diverse professions as dentistry and industrial manufacturing commenting on how such knowledge can be difficult to pass on and develop within a group of peers. People of professions that had

experienced dramatic changes in their work environment due to technological development or digitization were especially keen to discuss how embodied, experiential knowledge often is overlooked in such situations and that their professional skills were perhaps not as valued as before.

Opportunities to discuss design research usually happen in settings such as conferences where attendees are academics and involved in research of their own. In those cases, the discussion will inevitably be on a different level than when talking to members of the general public or to practitioners who are not engaged in academic research. My experience shows first and foremost that holding an exhibition as a part of a design research project can be a valuable tool for exposing both design professionals and others to the outcomes and knowledge generated through design research. In addition, the exhibition can serve as a method for the researcher to approach his or her results in a different fashion than through text. As such, the process of holding an exhibition can be seen as a tool for both knowledge dissemination and knowledge development and therefore, a method worthy of further research.

Conclusion

The purpose of the Tacit exhibition was to widen the reach and scope of my PhD research outcomes. In some sense, it was an effort to present graphic design research in a way that could communicate with people outside of academia. My primary goal was to evoke interest and thought among visitors. To achieve this, I sought inspiration in gestalt theory (Koffka, 1999), using juxtaposition and ordering in the exhibition design, creating counterpoints through material choices, and unusual sizes to "derail" thought and guide visitors toward alternative experiences of type and graphic design. The exhibition was therefore a vehicle for expression, representing the varied design methods discussed in my PhD thesis and the value of keeping an open attitude when choosing materials, forms, and processes in a design project to aid inspiration and discovery. My own mind was, in some ways, also derailed during the work on the exhibition design; I was forced to reconsider my perception of my own work in general and of design results and processes in particular. More specifically, the work has meant that I have moved graphic design outcomes away from their usual representation and instead created separate artefacts, presented as entities that are individual rather than elements of a composition – something I see as a way of making graphic design knowledge approachable and inviting. This is an indication that the exhibition form can be useful as a tool for analysis in a design research project, i.e., that employing the process of designing and organizing an exhibition offers a way to interpret and extract knowledge that has been generated through a design research study.

Further research is needed to build our understanding of the efficacy of different exhibition designs, which purposes they could best serve, and how an exhibition may fit into the design of a research project. With regard to my own exhibition design, I believe that it achieved the goal of showing a method to present design research results in a manner that introduces alternative and more “popular” ways of connecting with an audience. Even though the exhibition is not as concise and detailed as a dissertation, it nevertheless communicates the same material. Perhaps there are ways to design an exhibition in such a way that it could be the sole means of communicating research outcomes, but to me it represents a method that can be used in tandem with written results to enlarge and reinforce the reach and scope of the research project. Just as with any good design project, the outcome of the exhibition design can be experienced “as is” – i.e., regarded simply on terms of aesthetics and appearance – but it also has the potential to lead to novel approaches, to inspire new ideas and give rise to alternative design processes.

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