

Illustrative Reflections: Self-fashioning Practices at ECA

ISABELLE INTRONA & ALEXANDRA DUNN



FIG 1: First Encounter with The Third Year Illustration Studio (20/02/16). © Alexandra Dunn



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AM: “I don’t know what this means...why do I say ‘like’ all the time?”

Interviewer: “Oh everyone does, half the transcripts are ‘like’. It reads like a valley girl movie.”

This remark was the general consensus as we sat down with two Edinburgh College of Art students to read *Becoming an ‘Artist’? Self-fashioning in a collectively individual space*. This ethnography was the culmination of several months of observing their group of illustration undergraduates – a collaborative report we produced with fellow students Ryan Saunders and Clara Navarro Veiga. One ethnographer (Interviewer) sat in her kitchen with two of the students: her flatmate (IP) and close friend (AM). Their initial read-through began with giggles and ended in uncomfortable silence – it was obvious they were not entirely on board with what we had written.

IP: “God did I really say that?”

Interviewer: “Do you feel differently about it now?”

IP: “I don’t feel like it’s a fair representation. What AM does isn’t necessarily true for us all.”

Interviewer: “I agree; does that annoy you? That I could speak to AM and say all you guys do this one thing and you would completely disagree.”

IP: “Yeah, I think that’s how you came to the conclusions you have.”

Interviewer: “What do you mean?”

IP: “When you were explaining to me the part about our work not being individual I didn’t agree. Now reading that, I see where you are coming from but I don’t agree. I don’t think you can understand because you aren’t one of us.”

From the beginning, we knew that allowing them to read our analysis would potentially put a strain on our friendship but to have the relationship put down in an ‘us vs them’ way was a shock. In hindsight we see this as a trapping of anthropology as a discipline. You go into these projects assuming you are going to do some good and in your head you build this relationship of equals. However, looking at it from the side of being observed it must seem like the anthropologist has all the control – technically (although perhaps not ethically) they can print whatever they see fit and portray others in a way they may not agree with or like. During our time in the project we always viewed the students as having all the power as we were relying on them for information in order to produce an outcome. It was always in the back of our minds that at any moment they could say no and the project would be over.

Our ethnographic work explored the illustrators’ juxtaposed ideals of collaborative social work and the pursuit of an individual, original style. We suggested that jumping back and forth between these perceptions of themselves and their work informed how they behaved in their studio space.

Interviewer: “Is it easier to see the theory behind it?”

IP: “Yeah”

Interviewer: “We just thought it was interesting how for a stereotypical art student you think of how unique and individual they are and the same with what they do. Then we came in and it was constantly you guys checking with each other on colour schemes and “what do you think of this?”. It just went against everything we thought and then again with you guys saying it is all individual work.”

IP: “That’s because our work is for other people. We try to use each other as the consumer and I was very conscious of the fact you were there and I wasn’t acting normally. Normally I’m less social.”

AM: “Nah, you talk.”

Interviewer: “When I’ve been not doing the report in the past, you’ve seemed the same.”

IP: “That’s because you are there. If you weren’t there I wouldn’t.”

Interviewer: “Then was it a relief some of the days that anthropology people weren’t in?”

AM: “Yeah I probably did a bit more work because I just think that someone being there is like having a shiny new toy. I want to play.”

Interviewer: “Ah, so it’s not because I’m studying you – it is my actual presence.”

AM: “Yeah, because I don’t think we understand really what it is you really do.”

Interviewer: “Fair, I don’t think I do half the time.”

AM: “So yeah your presence influenced us but not because you were studying us.”

We noticed another tension of identities during our ethnographic work: between the Designer and the Artist. Our report suggested the work of an artist was based around its high cultural capital outside of the domains of typical social and economic life. In comparison, the designer is embedded in the wider social sphere and thus their work is informed by its potential for social and economic capital.

Interviewer: “Has the report changed the way you think about illustration?”

AM: “Since these conversations I’ve been thinking of that more and more - like the difference between artist and designer. so many differences.”

IP: “I wonder why AS said you don’t want your work to be too commercial?”

AM: “Probably from the tutor.”

Interviewer: “Do you not agree?”

IP: “Well I want to do advertising so I need to be commercial but AS does character design so I guess that commercial implies that you are following stereotypes.”

Through our discussions, many unnoticed nuances were becoming evident. Wide variations in each student’s perceptions had begun to rise to the surface. We had clearly influenced the illustration students, but it was also clear that this wasn’t always in ways we had intended.

Interviewer: “I ask because of MP [illustration student], what do you think about the fact that she’s not doing illustration anymore? Her and RS [ethnographer] were having a chat after the interview and she mentioned that because of this [the interview], this made her realise that she wants to go into fine art. That this is what she wants over illustration.”

AM: “I definitely wouldn’t put her as a fine artist - no. What she does isn’t fine art, it isn’t thought through or commercial.”

Interviewer: “But I thought it was okay to not be commercial depending on the type of work you do?”

AM: “She’s just not cut out for it and if this made her realise it then she must have already been swaying on the matter.”

Interviewer: “She was saying to us that she really enjoyed the course until she read this and then she hated it. Yeah, we felt we fucked her over so bad.”

IP: “I guess its best she decided now.”

This marks the first time in which we have really been confronted with a moral dilemma in our personal work instead of hearing vignettes from lecturers or in books. The fact that our work influenced MP in such a life altering way did not sit well with us even after she had assured us that it was the best course of action and that she was happy we had prompted the change. Feeling uncomfortable doing something you love is a truly odd feeling. It made us question our work and wonder whether a change of sentence or wording could have had a different outcome. This brings into play the ethics of anthropology and whether the good that arises from our curiosity and analytic tendency outweighs the bad. Our hope is that through reflecting on situations like this we can begin to understand our own feelings and continue to contribute meaningful work through our future ethnographies.



FIG 2: Illustration by "MP", commissioned for our final ethnographic report.
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