Statement of Existence:
A debate on the role of awards in design education and industry

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Thursday October 23rd 2008, Market Gallery, Glasgow

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TRANSCRIPT

NEIL MCGUIRE: Good evening. This debate is on the topic of design awards in industry and education. This debate has come about on the back of last year having set up the Scottish design non-awards non-hierarchical statement of existence. This was a deliberately antagonistic counterpoint to the Scottish Design Awards to try and invoke some kind of debate and discussion about awards and design and to try and get a discussion going about what people value and how they do it, etc. We have set up an online survey to get peoples' opinions on awards and some of the stuff that has been fed back to us through that survey will be playing on the powerpoint in the background. The powerpoint isn't controlled by us but randomly playing so it may be that the point on the wall is in complete opposition to the point that I might be trying to make at the time which could be quite interesting. It is very bad practice but it could be interesting and might throw up some new connections. Also in there are some images from award ceremonies and some quotes, as well, from recent publications and articles about design awards.

On my left is Dr Paul Rodgers from Napier University, who has kindly agreed to present the pro-award argument and I will be presenting the anti-award argument. We will both present our cases for about 10 minutes each then we will open the floor for discussion. The discussion is going to be recorded, which may be put onto the website as well.

I would also like to thank David Kerr from Market Gallery who suggested this as an idea, so I'm really grateful to him for his help.

For the discussion afterwards, I'm keen for there to be some kind of argument, some kind of debate, but also I would like to come up with new ideas and new directions. So if it is possible to make a response to the person who has just spoken then that would make the debate flow in a logical way. If you do want to change topic that's fine but it would be good to deal with topics and close them down one by one.

Argument against design awards

I'm going to start with a disclaimer that I have, in the past, entered design awards and I haven't won any. I would just like it to be known that it's not from the bitter, loser point of view that I'm speaking. I'm speaking as a person who has developed this point of view from observing awards as a designer — as someone who works in an educational context and also as someone who has been a design student aswell and has entered design awards as a student.

So, that disclaimer out of the way, I'm going to start by reading an email exchange that I had with Nick Barley, Director of The Lighthouse in Glasgow. He couldn't make it tonight but I wanted to start with his position on awards:

"For what it's worth I agree that awards have major downsides but, on balance, I think they are an effective means of encouraging debate both within and outside the profession. For all its faults, and there are many things about it I detest, the Turner Prize has raised the profile of contemporary art in the UK. I believe that more artists are able to earn a living in their practice in the UK today than was the case in the golden age of conceptual art in the 1970's. Not that today's art is any better as a result but more people have a chance to do it."

My response to him was, "I broadly agree with the point that you're raising about profile, but that's on the back of an untenable premise, ie. that Cathy Wilkes' work is better than Mark Leckie's for example, not to mention the countless other artists producing excellent work. And surely it only works if people suspend their disbelief and go along with this. If we want people, ie. the public, to see and appreciate design or art as the broad spectrum that it is then these events, that focus on the cult of the personality or the individual judged in a hierarchical fashion, seem to run counter to that. I also think that the debate awards engender, and I'm thinking more here about the Scottish Design Awards and D&AD than the Turner Prize, is not a particularly insightful debate, rather it's one of who won what and they didn't deserve it, we did. A more meaningful, constructive debate could perhaps be developed if there wasn't the back-story of X

winning the prize. Not quite sure, but we'll work on it. Best wishes, Neil."

I read that out because it broadly outlines my position in relation to design awards. Obviously a lot has been written about this recently both in Eye magazine, Creative Review and there has been a lot of tub-thumping and tearing out of hair over the fact that no major pencil awards in this year's D&AD awards were awarded in the graphics section, and I'll come back to that. Basically the argument I'm going to make breaks down into 5 points: (1) awards fail against their own logic; (2) awards are increasingly impractical in the world in which we work; (3) awards are a power structure invented to perpetuate to the advantage of the awarding body rather than the recipient; (4) awards fail against what I personally think is valuable in design; (5) while there are some positive aspects to awards, those positive aspects could be better achieved by other means.

1.   Awards fail against their own logic

I think even people who enter and win awards say they should be taken with a pinch of salt. The idea that, in an area as diverse as design or art, the best can be judged and all the others can be deemed to be either not as good, or second best, seems to make that a nonsense. The question therefore arises that if it isn't possible to assert that one piece of work is better than another, then what is the point of awards and why have them? There are two distinctions here between educational awards (where people enter against a set brief that has a specific brief and where everyone has the same brief) and professional awards (where people enter work across a number of different categories). In professional awards I think is very difficult because essentially what people are trying to do is judge two things that aren't necessarily the same. So, is one job done in one context better than another job done in another context for a completely different client, for a completely different reason and with a completely different set of criteria? For professional awards I think it makes things very difficult because you're trying to compare things that aren't alike. In educational awards the logic that you can still judge what's best, fails again but for different reasons. It's to do with the subjectivity of the award, the judging

panel and the different contexts in which different people might answer that problem. I like to think of design as being somewhere where there can be several solutions to one problem and neither can be better than one or the other, they are just different solutions. I think about design as a broad church and a much more useful way of thinking about the way in which designers work.

2. Awards are increasingly impractical in a world of blurring boundaries.

I think the categorisation in awards mirrors categorisation in educational contexts that seem to be increasingly out of sorts with the way people are working. So, if people are going to give awards then they are going to have to give awards for certain categories and I think that the way people are working collaboratively, across categories, but also working not necessarily in art or design but one foot in either camp, makes the idea that you can judge what they are doing increasingly difficult.

3. Awards are a power structure invented to the advantage of the awarding body.

I think it's also interesting to think about how much money is generated through the entering of awards and the attending of award ceremonies.

If you look at the Scottish Design Awards as an example, then even the awards dinner costs about £100 a ticket, and then if you multiply that across, it's a really large amount of money moving around on the back of the awards, not to mention the entry fees in the first place.

And that is money that is propping up that organisation. In order for the Scottish Design Awards – and by association The Drum and Prospect magazines which are also run by the same group – to exist, they need to have these awards, both for financial reasons as it supports the running costs of the core organisation, but also for power reasons because if the Drum, and by association the Scottish Design Awards, becomes the body that decides what is good in Scottish Design, then that means they are in a position of power, making people 'need' them, and in the process

justifying their 'authority' and existence. We should also look at D&AD, which in its mission statement has said that it is an educational charity – I would question what educational value there is in the awards – there is some, but I would question whether it could not be better achieved through another non-awards related structure. But the problem with that is if it wasn't an award then it wouldn't be headline grabbing, and it wouldn't get them the attention they need in order to exist and keep their position of power as arbiter of the design and art direction community.

4. Awards fail against what I personally value in design

What I'm suggesting is that awards fail against bigger concerns. In an article called Awards Madness by Jason Grant in Eye magazine, there was an interesting, perceptive comment that what happens when people debate awards is they start to debate the mechanism of the awards or the process or say that the judging panel wasn't fair or the dynamics were not right, the criteria were not right, it was the wrong category, etc, that such and such won for such and such a reason. Rather than questioning the actual processes, the mechanisms, the way in which people enter awards, it might be more interesting to think about what awards designers would naturally be drawn towards?

There is another interesting quotation in that article – "arts awards or cultural awards are a structure that is imposed on these things from the outside." If designers and artists had the chance to think about ways in which they could generate publicity for themselves, or further themselves, develop new work, then probably awards aren't the thing they would come up with. To me anyway it seems like a fairly alien structure. It seems to run completely counter to what I value and completely counter to what I would hope that students at the art school would value. Certainly, when I was a student, the idea that within a year group we would all try and judge our work hierarchically against each other to say this is the best and this isn't the best, would have seemed really odd. So, I was wondering if there aren't better structures. If you imagine (a) the money that goes into awards, and (b) the energy and time that is put into organising them as well in terms of entering them, and think about what you could do differently that would be

really interesting. They don't marry necessarily with what I would value so maybe there are other ways of creating the positive aspects and the self-promotion that we look for.

It's interesting that in Scotland, for example, the things that I think are furthering debate and discussion in design, are things like Long Lunch which is organised voluntarily by people who do it in their spare time, and other more informal events like that. I don't think The Drum or The Lighthouse particularly run events that connect the design community, that bring people together to further the discussion. The main event that The Drum runs is the Scottish Design Awards which isn't a forum for any kind of in-depth debate or discussion.

To summarise point 5, awards have some positive aspects. For example (and although I do contest this slightly) students get contact with industry through award schemes. Through D&AD, students get the chance to put their work in front of design professionals who are held in high esteem within the industry. That said, there was an interesting point that came back from one of the surveys we did: if awards are meant to be emulating real practice, i.e. giving students a taste of 'real life', they are actually a very odd way of going about it. In the commerical context you would work with a client – it would be a process of collaboration and discussion. In an awards context what you are doing is basically answering a brief to a client with whom you never have any contact and, if you don't win it, you would probably never have any contact or feedback. Only if you are one of the few that do win do you get any kind of feedback and even then it's not necessarily particularly helpful.

So, in many ways the argument that awards prepare students for the reality of professional life is a falacy. What it does is prepare students for the reality of entering awards in their professional life. So, I think the argument that it gives people that insight is false. What would work better is if D&AD thought more creatively about its role as an educational charity – it would be good to do things that did genuinely get students in touch with professionals, that gave them the opportunity to present their work to professionals and get some real feedback. This would be quite easy to organise if the funds were redirected, and it could be done

regionally and nationally. Those are some examples of things that could be done better. In a professional context the money and time that is spent entering design awards could be put into collaborative projects. Another interesting point from the Jason Grant article in Eye magazine is that whilst it seems counter-intuitive, awards, i.e. competitive situations, in psychological studies have been found to cause a deterioration in performance, whereas collaborative work is generally found to help people raise their performance. So the idea that we need to be competitive, that competition is an essential part of the business seems to also be on slightly shaky ground. That we are all competitive is undoubtedly true and I would number myself among those people who are competitive and want to do well. But I think that what needs to be done is to draw a line between being competitive with yourself, i.e. pushing yourself further and really wanting to achieve something, and being competitive in the sense of trying to organise everything and rank it in a hierarchichal order. I think that is counter to what I see as being valuable in design.

**Dr Paul Rodgers, Napier University —
argument for design awards**

DR PAUL RODGERS: I come from a product design background so I love competitions. I've never entered one or can't remember, I kind of entered one but it was a disaster but I don't think it scarred me too much. The other thing I'll say is that I contradict myself all the time so I'm probably not the best person to be in a debating context.

Point 1. Judging – judging is part of human nature and I think we're all doing it now. I'm doing it now, I'm trying to talk but at the same time I'm thinking I'm not doing as good a job as Neil just did and I'm not going to be talking as long as Neil did, so that probably makes me worse than him as a debater. I think probably some of you are doing that right now, thinking I don't like what you're saying or the way you're saying it and Neil was better. I think we love to judge, it's part of human nature. It's a particularly British concern or obsession – we love lists, we love leagues. It was Nick Hornby, who I'll judge to be maybe third or fourth in my list of favourite authors, wrote in his novel High Fidelity, which is littered with lists such as top ten songs to listen to when you've been dumped. So I think that judging is part of what we do as people. We do it consciously and sub-consciously and I don't really have a problem with that. I think we should just get along with the fact that, yes, we judge things all the time and we should be proud of that and happy to do it.

Point 2. Blurry boundaries – I like blurry stuff, I like fuzziness. I think what's interesting and what I encourage in my students is for product designers to enter non-product design competitions. So we actively encourage that and actively discourage them from doing things that a product designer would do. We get our product design students to enter graphic design competitions and we get our graphic design students to enter product design competitions, and we get some graphic design students to enter fashion design competitions. I think that's really healthy because they respond in different ways and break certain rules and certain ways of doing things and accepted practice and disciplines and I think that blurriness and fuzziness and naivete is a really good thing and a really healthy thing. I

encourage my students to cross boundaries to interlope in a real attempt to beat graphic designers, if they are product designers, at their own game. And we have had some success at that and I think that's a healthy thing to do.

Point 3. Power – yes possibly good point. We really only enter D&AD awards but, as I said, I come from product design and I think up until the last couple of years there's never been a product design category for students to enter. But before that we would enter things like environmental design, branding, graphics and ambient media type projects. We would encourage product designers to do mad stuff and occasionally we won, we had a good record in D&AD. I think D&AD win sometimes, I think David Kessler who was head of D&AD obviously achieved some pretty good recognition and is now Head of the Design Council, so perhaps the D&AD awards were part of D&AD's success and part of his success. I think I would concede that D&AD has maybe become a little bit of a victim of its own success, it's now become almost formulaic in the way that they do things. I think for a student they offer really clear criteria, where they ask three questions of the work and I think that's good for a student to know where they stand and certainly, as a tutor, it makes your job a little bit easier, and for me it seems to be fairly clear cut.

Point 4 – don't know

Point 5 – I think there are definitely positive aspects to awards. It's easy for us to sit round here and criticise them a little bit but I think when you go to D&AD student awards and you see the joy on the faces of some young students that have won a pencil, its fantastic. I know quite a few of our students have won a yellow pencil which has then led on to fantastic things for them. We have some concerns that maybe aren't covered here but certainly in the near future we will continue to use awards. I think we use the awards often to not only pitch our students against other students, and D&AD has become really international and heavily over-subscribed, but I think we also do it to see how we as tutors are performing. I think some of the concerns about using awards in education are that they become a little bit easy. And tutors can, and I'm as guilty as the next person, use them as a lazy option. I think the positive side of that is that

you get some interesting project briefs written by people that are in industry, for the right or wrong reason I don't know, but some of them are particularly challenging. The other competition we do is the Royal Society of Arts which I think has gone completely and totally nutty over the last 5 years. They are obsessed by the environment, old people, inclusive worlds and they have become so worthy that we've actually moved away from them. They may well be more appropriate for the world we live in but I think they've lost all sense of fun.

I think they are a good thing and particularly for students because students have fun.

NEIL MCGUIRE Thanks to Paul for coming along to present the pro-award side because I know from conversations I've had with him it's not a black and white issue. But what we're both doing is taking a bit of an extreme position on either side. Invitations were put out to The Lighthouse and Scottish Design Awards, both of whom did respond but were unable to attend tonight. So neither of those bodies are here to put their cases forward. What we will do now is open the floor to discussion, so we've got about 45 minutes to an hour where we can talk about some of the issues. We can start it off with questions so if anyone wants to ask a question on anything either Paul or I have said, or if you have a point to make we can start it that way.

Questions and discussion

DAVE SAPIEN You talked about the advantages of public exposure for people entering competitions. What could possibly be the negative aspect of that?

NM If you were in it for publicity I can't think of negative aspects. I can't think of anything that can go wrong with that.

DS If you do something controversial it could damage you in the future.

NM I think that is an interesting point about what it is that awards recognise because just from observing it happening you can see that there are certain things that are award-winning. I did an interview with Michael Johnson who is a graphic designer and he said that nothing original ever wins awards because it "scares the shit out of people" because they have nothing to judge it against. So, if you are working in quite a radical way, in whatever it is you're doing, then that is unlikely to ever win awards. What does get picked up is the stuff that is closest to what already exists so that people feel comfortable with it. It's not necessarily awards that do that. I think it's interesting that there is a rise of blogging culture in design. There has been an exponential growth of graphic design blogs recently that are magpie-ish in terms of the way they pick up on things that look nice and fit the current idea of graphic design and post them and there is no discussion about them, no debate going on around them. I think awards do a similar thing because they exist in this vacuum where there isn't much discussion about why something won or why something did or didn't have value. It perpetuates a kind of visual thing. One of the slides shows the D&AD awards and you can see there's a massive aircraft hangar full of design work and judges. It's often the people who have been judges who have the most cynical view of the work because, if they are judging for 8 hours a day for 3 days solid...

I think there is a quote which says that it's a miracle if they can make any kind of valued judgement about anything after the first hour. It's done on such a vast, industrial scale that I can't understand how it could work. I've gone slightly off from what your question was.

PR I think David's obvious problem was with the D&AD kind of cattle factory of deciding who wins what. I think with the negative recognition, there's a fairly obvious example in architecture with public building projects and that's Hilary Cottam who I think won Designer of the Year in 2004/5, and Hilary Cottam takes great pride in saying that she's not a designer but won Designer of the Year. I think at least one person lost their job over it and people were resigning when Hilary Cottam was awarded designer of the year, she's a social scientist but works really closely with architects and has done some amazing school and public building work in London. Dyson resigned as one of the trustees of the Design Museum, and Alice Rawsthorn, who was the director of the Design Museum, ultimately lost her job over it. So I think there's some negative press, certainly some negative responses to Hilary Cottam being awarded Designer of the Year. I think there was a really interesting debate at that point because Dyson was coming out saying British design awards had lost the plot. He resigned, kind of throwing his toys out of the pram and walked away and now he's going to try and set up his own Dyson Institute. I think Terence Conran was as critical as Dyson about Hilary Cottam's work. I thought it was incredible that the responses of two people who claim to be designers (and I think as designers we all sit here and kind of say, we're liberal and open-minded and we like blurriness and fuzziness and we want people to get engaged in debates and get engaged in projects) then you've got the responses of two really successful people being critical of a woman who represents a group which is under-represented in design anyway. I find a lot of design disingenious actually but maybe we can talk about that in another debate. I find designers say one thing but really they do another.

NM What does anyone else think on that topic?

AUDIENCE What about DBA (Design Business Association) awards? Where does that fit in? Where entries are submitted based on the criteria of the work you did for the client. Do you find that kind of award of value or worth?

NM That's an interesting one. For anyone that doesn't know, DBA stands for the Design Business Association and they have an award called the Design Effectiveness Award,

which nationally has quite a high profile. On one hand you can say that it's an endeavour for them to be quite explicit about the criteria. I made an enquiry at the Scottish Design Awards about the criteria for judging work and there was no response, so the best I can assume is that basically they get some judges in a room and they discuss and decide. Whereas, with the DBA, I do think it is maybe something that is trying to be more structured and it's quite explicit about what it is and what you've done in order to have won it. I still think that these kind of categorisations and criteria have become slightly spurious. Statistics can be spun in a number of different ways and I think it becomes about how well you make the case that your design is effective against those particular criteria. So, you're always going to find yourself in this contradictory position as soon as you try and put value on anything like that and the only way awards can work is if people suspend their disbelief and go along with it because that's the only way they can exist. And I think the DBA made an effort to become more accountable in terms of what they are doing.

AUDIENCE I've entered the DBA awards and the company I worked for was shortlisted for best new product. I'd been doing a bit of research on previous years' winners and it was always the big brands that won and it was exactly the same when we were there, it was big brands like Tefal. It all comes down to what you are putting forward for these kind of awards. Big brands have always got more information that they can put in so you're going to end up a loser from the beginning.

AUDIENCE Yes, I think that the way the DBA judges it is that before you start a project you have to set up criteria but if you've done the award before, for argument's sake, you can specify what criteria you want so you can always use the system to an extent. If you were doing a new campaign or new initiative for your company and then one of the things you measure is your awareness of that campaign you'd never done it before, then you can effectively have 100% awareness of that, which then makes your proposal look unbelievable because that's 100% recognition from the employees and nothing ever before this existed so that kind of abuses the system.

AUDIENCE That particular award is not necessarily about design and whether it's good or bad. It's about how much money your'e making from it. I didn't like that as an awards structure. It's a different thing but I just didn't like it because that was what it was about, how much money it was your product made.

NM It's about a very specific thing and I think what won this year was a digital tyre pressure checker because it has saved x number of hours checking the tyre pressure of a lorry. So, with something like that, you get odd winners for something you never hear about otherwise.

AUDIENCE What differentiates those two awards from something like the Scottish Design Awards is the submission because the D&AD is not as laborious as the submission for the DBA. But for the Scottish Design Awards you never submit a brief with it so it is in complete isolation, and the judges don't seem to have much to work with. So you can't really say that someone wasn't a fair judge because if you don't give them the brief and how it was solved it then they're only going to judge what's left.

NM Yes that is at the centre of my position, that if it is largely to do with luck or chance or any of those factors then it decreases the value that it has. It's only when people pretend it's not luck and purely about ability of skill then the award would then have value.

PR I don't really understand the Scottish Design Awards. From a design tutor point of view the criteria for D&AD student awards I think are crystal clear. They are about the brief – is it a good idea, is it well presented and is it proficient. I think those criteria are good, they are fairly generic and you can make a yes/no decision on it quite quickly. Perhaps that's a good thing, I don't know.

GAYLIE RUNCIMAN I'm from a fine art background but I'm now working in design. As a parallel in the fine art world there are things like the Turner Prize, but why aren't designers creating a different model in the same way that a number of years ago Transmission Gallery did where there was a number of artists who felt that they didn't want to go to London and they started this small gallery that wasn't

particularly taken seriously but has produced a Turner nominee, two Turner winners, etc. Why aren't designers, amongst their own community, creating a different model? Ironically, I think you can create a different model and then what happens is it almost consumes itself. Transmission has now almost eaten itself and become the thing it was trying to fight against. From my limited experience working in design, we were involved in a show last year called Designers Block. It came out of a catastrophe of the shop Rory and Piers had and they got all these amazing designers that nobody had ever heard of but were selling. But they said they were two years too early and two streets away from the right street in the east end. They went bankrupt and said right let's make this into a show because these designers deserve to be seen. Now the show has been going for ten years and they've shown in Tokyo and Milan. They piggy-backed mercilessly on 100% Design, which they didn't want to be part of because they bring in different designers. So, I put it to you why is somebody not creating a different model here? Why is somebody not saying give us your briefs that are really different and do an exhibition of proposals?

PR I think that's interesting, I've taken part in Designers Block and I think there's a lot of positive things to be said about Piers and Rory.

GR Let's not make it personal, it's more about what the show represents. What I like is that we were two stands away from people who were students and very well established designers and people like us who were not designers but were allowed in. It wasn't perfect but it was inclusive.

PR I actually found it quite exclusive. You have to pay.

GR Yes, it's a trade show.

PR It's not inclusive for all because the fees now for Designers Block.

GR Don't talk about the fees, talk about an alternative model to awards. What's the alternative? The alternative is not saying Designers Block is exclusive. Designers Block is only an example of a trade show that came from somewhere else.

PR What I'm disputing is the fact that it's a different model.

GR But I don't know what the different model is, what I'm hoping is that designers have tried a different model and it doesn't work. There have to be different models. Is there an alternative design show? Do designers go to Nick Barley and ask him to donate the use of part of The Lighthouse and put on an alternative design show for three weeks.

AUDIENCE Is that not what the Scottish Show is?

GR I have no idea, maybe it needs an alternative to the alternative.

AUDIENCE The Scottish Show has got Timorous Beasties and fashion and retail outlets and then it's got smaller design agencies. It tends to be the usual suspects, they put a show on in The Lighthouse and then it tours.

GR I've been to the Scottish Show and it's great but why doesn't someone just take over an industrial space? I don't understand as I come from a fine art background where people just go out and do it.

PR I think, originally, Designers Block was doing that. They were taking over huge industrial spaces that they were getting for free that nobody wanted to use.

GR I'm actually more interested in Transmission which was actually a grassroots thing. Designers Block was simply the only design thing I can relate to. Transmission was something that a group of artists/designers decided they were going to do for themselves.

PR I think that's what Designers Block initially offered. It's a forum, a space for young graduating designers. I think you and I probably have the same issue with existing models and infrastructures because one of the things that bugs me is that we produce fantastic students in Scotland yet it's incredibly difficult for them to succeed particularly in Scotland. My response to students is you've got to go to London and establish yourself there because there is really very little in Scotland for you to do.

GR Well maybe rather than that you could say you need to get together and put on a show in your own terms?

PR Yes, but it's pretty difficult because I don't think there is…what I'm trying to say is that Designers Block I think was an alternative model which has become the same as anything else.

GR Ok but for the first three years it wasn't. What I'm getting here is a tremendous sense of defeatism, I hear discontent but I don't hear a discussion of an alternative.

AUDIENCE This lady has got a point, it can apply here but it can apply across the board. It seems to be the two best cutting edge artistic things in Scotland are computer graphics/ computer games and the music industry. And the thing about these is that they are grassroots, there's nothing to do with London. It's actually amateurish and I think what the lady is speaking about is designers are seen as professional, almost industry connected professional. If the scene is in London it's because it is established, but if you really want a scene like the computer games industry or the music industry in Scotland then it has to be amateurish, grassroots. There isn't a scene but let's create a scene. I think it's a confidence thing to start off an amateurish scene, start off the scratch groups, start off these things like Transmission because they started off with no money and no backing from industry and yet what happens is if the confidence comes, whole industries are built on these things eventually, not right away. So if you want to make money right away and you want your own career you go to London. But let's have a scene in Scotland and start it off amateurishly.

NM I think Gaylie your point is pretty much where we were at with it, and I think point 5 (which I maybe didn't make enough) of was that I don't want to be the person who is saying isn't this all terrible and I'm conscious that it's a strange way to go about it to do a debate on the premise of something being terrible. But point 5, as I was trying to say, is that I just find awards counter-imaginative. They're not imaginative forums and they're not imaginative solutions to anything really and I do feel that they are imposed from outside. The reason for focusing on them is that they are the biggest forum in which people come together and talk about these things at present. But I totally agree with what you're saying about what we need to do to move on from here.

AUDIENCE Could you not have your own amateur awards, start student awards?

GR There is enough incredible talent around to allow those alternatives to grow. I think Transmission is a better example than Designers Block, and Glasgow became the darling of the art scene because people had stuck it out here and worked. I'm interested in peoples' feedback as to why that can't work in design and I think it is about a group of people who work, it is about talent but it is also about creating an alternative on those terms. And it will consume itself the way Transmission has completely eaten itself, but it served a purpose at the time and something else will take over.

NM I'm a designer and I feel like I'm somewhere in between things sometimes; somewhere where you've got the creativity but then there are other elements of working as a designer that I haven't found a way of getting around, that are basically against everything in my own work that I'm trying to do. I think that Transmission, as a model, is an interesting Glasgow comparison and I think for design it would be different because it's not the same thing but there needs to be something.

PR There are some interesting things like Droog in the Netherlands which is quite interesting, where people came together and which was driven by one or two people. But I think they received a lot of backing, there was a lot of money pumped in, certainly at some point whether it was near the start or when they were getting established, by the Dutch government. There are 3 or 4 individuals who are trying to do a Scottish Droog, so they are being backed at the moment by an entrepreneur who is pumping quite a bit of money into the creation of a series of objects particularly furniture. So, there are possibilities to doing something like that.

AUDIENCE Could you explain a bit more about what Droog is?

PR Droog was a collection of Dutch designers, artists and architects. I don't really know the origins too much, they were led by two main people and they went round the shows, particularly Design Academy in Eindhoven, and picked some selected products and went further afield to places like Spain, England and Belgium. They invited people to make a product they'd seen at a show, or gave them a small commission to make an object and they started a collection of objects. And the way that they developed is that they continually went around and picked talent. They worked on a couple of smaller projects, the one that comes to mind was the Iranian bomb project where they selected a context in the former East Germany and they selected about a dozen designers to respond to the local context, so again they produced a number of objects. But some of these objects would come under the umbrella of design art. They were incredibly expensive but they've been produced by a company called DVD, which is a Dutch furniture/product manufacturer. So they've gone from quite humble beginnings to this massive organisation that produces furniture and products and probably has a turnover in the many millions of pounds each year. It has been a real revelation, and it was timely, Droog came along at the right time.

NM There are a few students who I'd like to ask a quick question of. Do you think the way in which you're working fits any of these structures we've talked about or are you keen to develop other working methods, be it either collaboratively or on any other projects?

LIZZIE MALCOLM I'm really keen to make an alternative. I think the way that we're taught is really different to the way awards work and I wouldn't say I've been exposed to much of that really competitive way of thinking. Our briefs are really collaborative and we're encouraged to work in groups. It just seems it's not until much later on that you're thrown into what industry wants and you need to get really competitive. So I think what you were saying about making an alternative, it is definitely in earlier ways of studying where you haven't been phased or jaded by that world. A lot of peers that I talk to in the studio are really keen to do something different and not have to feel that you have to constantly be in competition to be good, to have a title.

NM Speaking from my perspective there's an appetite for some kind of forum where people who are studying design can meet people who are practicing because it is essentially a vocational course. Its about doing it in some sort of context of the real world, whether that's a commercial one or non-commercial one. I think Gaylie's point is a timely reminder that we need to focus on some of the alternatives that we could look at and quite possibly there are opportunities there to make some kind of link between people who are working as designers and people who are studying in a non-competitive environment. So that's definitely a thought I'm going to take from here.

AUDIENCE What extent do you think work placements should be mandatory to all students?

NM I think if the only way for students to get work placements is through some sort of competition then that's completely wrong. I think there are some people who aren't interested in that way of working and don't want to do it. One of my frustrations with D&AD is that it claims to be an educational charity yet I know it does run various schemes other than the awards. But it seems like a disproportionate amount of its time is spent around this whole construct that is made of the awards whereas, in terms of keeping this forward looking, what we could do instead is create regional forums where it's not about winning but showcasing your work. The other thing that's interesting is that people from different colleges rarely speak to each other, we're only 50 miles from Edinburgh College of Art and I imagine most students at Glasgow will graduate without ever cross-critiquing or collaborating with those students. There are more than enough design professionals in those two cities to do some kind of project whereby people get some genuine feedback on their work from a professional. I think that is a good point that design awards give students contact with people who aren't tutors. I think if the only contact you have is with people who are working in that very educational context it can become a bit narrow. So if there is some way of making sure everyone can have that kind of contact then I think that would be a good thing. I don't think people should have to compete for placements.

AUDIENCE Do you think Schools encourage students to go into competitions so that they can get some of the kudos on it as well?

NM Yes, I suppose awards become shorthand for "we are good" so that the Head of Department can say we won six out of eight of the rosettes that were given out at the student awards then that's a very shorthand way of saying we're trying to impress potential students. These things do have a currency, I'm not denying that, they have a cache. If you get an award then it can open doors for you – I don't deny that either. It's just when it's opening doors in a "being part of the club" way, its not necessarily to do with the best work. And I think most people who win awards don't say "we're the best" and just take it with a big pinch of salt, it's just a bit of a laugh, it's just good fun. Which is fine but then I come back to the point that if it is just a bit of a laugh that's fine but a lot of things seem to be based on it and a lot of the discussion that we have about design is based on a roll out of those sort of criteria being applied. You could have a much fuller discussion if it wasn't tied to something in that sense.

AUDIENCE Can I just ask, from a student perspective, what your opinion is on the Scottish design industry? How do you find about the good companies to work for? Who are the designers? Do you have that kind of knowledge?

AUDIENCE No, not at all

AUDIENCE I don't really know if that's such a good thing anyway to be so aware of it. There should be a bigger forum for industry designers, like today we're having this discussion. It would be really good to go to an event like this and be with people in the industry and talk and get their perspective on things as well. I know there're loads of places on the internet where you can discuss things but to get proper feedback it would be good to have a forum where you can also exhibit work and where you don't have to go through judges or very strict curators. Maybe it can be in a smaller group of people and just have a discussion about what's actually going on. Its really hard to find that, I don't know if there are talks like this going on all the time but it's very rare.

AUDIENCE The only thing that's really comparable is Long Lunch but the speakers tend to be from outside Glasgow which I find a bit funny.

AUDIENCE Yes we've had that before, the reason that is we did it once with a Scottish based speaker and nobody turned up.

AUDIENCE Yes there is a big problem with Scotland but remember we had the International Council of Designers over and held a reception for them at The Lighthouse at night and Oscar and I were the only ones that turned up. It was lightly publicised but that goes on constantly in the design industry in Scotland.

PR You mentioned collaboration and about a year ago in product design circles I managed to get some funding from the Scottish Funding Council to do a collaborative product design project. We called it Product Scotland and it was represented by every art school or college that did product design with two exceptions, Glasgow University and Glasgow Caledonian University. We did a number of events in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Dundee and it was really refreshing to get people talking to people from each institution because generally you see them as competition. You don't see them as potential collaborators. We managed to attract 120 people – not only product designers but artists, anthropologists, social scientists, manufacturers, business people. After 4 events, with some events more successful than others, you could see a number of product ideas coming out of them that were potentially ripe for making so that young designers can make a bit of money from things. But it fizzled out and when we applied for repeat funding we didn't get anything, which is kind of part of the problem. You take things so far then it becomes problematic and everyone goes back to their old ways of working. But I think there's a real spirit there to do things.

AUDIENCE Because of the credit crunch things in the industry are really quite difficult but I see the business world is changing and it's all about collaborative working, cross-pollination of ideas. You don't need to have a designer using 20 staff anymore, you can have 2 or 3 designers who work together and with bigger projects they can pool resources. People can come from anywhere as well with

these kind of groups and you can work with people who might have come from a different discipline. Now is a good time for it because I do think the industry is going to have to change if it has not changed already.

AUDIENCE There's a great gallery in Glasgow with a lot of illustrative and graphic design. But if I went in there and I was asked to choose 1st, 2nd and 3rd out of these, I would be appalled because the idea of comparing all this stuff is just an appalling idea. I think with these design awards it's not about who is the best out of these wonderful people, it's not about who wins first prize, it's all about kudos, entry level into the industry, cross-fertilisation. So I think there should be an honesty about it.

AUDIENCE Do you know if the public is allowed to see all the entries to these awards?

AUDIENCE That's a good question I had never heard of the Scottish Design Awards before. I used to go to all the design shows in Glasgow at the GSA and Glasgow College of Building and Printing but I have no idea what these awards are all about.

AUDIENCE It's very closed that's what the problem is.

AUDIENCE There's nothing really wrong with the awards, I don't think they are a bad thing. But I think the biggest issue is how there is a large amount of money being generated by it which is good to the extent that design agencies are putting money in but it's how it's being spent. That money could be better spent at grassroots level, generating the actual Scottish industry as opposed to generating the fat cats' income.

AUDIENCE It's a commercial organisation they are running.

AUDIENCE If an agency win an award they can go to a potential client and say they've got two D&AD awards and that can help get that job or client. But if the money that is paid for you to get that kudos went back to the new people coming up in the industry; that's what the Scottish Design Awards should be doing and make the Scottish industry a proper industry.

NM I think I'm just not sure that it's doing that. That's fine if that's the motive but I think we need to look for another alternative because it is a massive frustration if you think about the talent and how talented the students are across the whole of Scotland and how few of them choose to stay here when they finish their course. It's the same in any country where you've got a capital city that will always draw people towards it.

AUDIENCE That is the educators fault to an extent because you were saying you actively encourage them to go into the D&AD and it's offered up as student prizes. When I was student it was drummed into me that D&AD was what you had to win and I never did it. I've never entered but I still thought that if I got that award I would be alright, I don't know why. When I was a student and went on my placement I was sent to London, I was never made aware what Scottish designers were doing and who was really good in Scotland. I don't know if that still happens and I don't know if students still get sent to London for placements. Send them to Scottish agencies, send them to people who are doing good work. I don't know if they do work in progress shows anymore?

NM Yes.

AUDIENCE Students are also under pressure because of fees now. There are a lot of optional competitions students can enter to win some extra cash, which is distracting. When you're a student you should have practise that's independent of market interests. I think students are under more pressure to enter competitions now than we ever were.

AUDIENCE With things like work in progress – you could turn that into workshops, eg. this is an interim show and this is degree show work, at whatever level and have people from industry just come and give feedback, rather than individual portfolio surgeries, to make it more like a work in progress.

GR The only trouble is that it then becomes formalised or becomes bypartisan to the institution which is why, like with the Transmission thing, as a graduate and a student, you have a power because you have the reputation. Be sure that everything coming to you is the next big thing because

people love elitism and that is why people like alternative shows because they are curious in case they miss the next big thing. So there is a power to students but it shouldn't come to the institution.

AUDIENCE With an alternative idea I doubt that big companies would be interested in taking part if there wasn't a competition and prizes. If there are prizes then these tend to get publicised and if that wasn't the format I think it would be harder to, but not impossible, get companies involved.

AUDIENCE If you admit it's for the good of the industry and you don't acknowledge that if I win this then I am the best, it's more like, if I win this then that's great for us. We were lucky this year we're actually doing some service to the design community. If you win an award, then you go and do a workshop at the GSA or you go and meet students in a work in progress show, etc.

AUDIENCE Can I ask a very practical question? Does every university and higher education institution have some kind of ranking system? For instance, recently Glasgow University were saying they are up in the rankings. Every institution, when they move up the rankings, publicises it but how are these rankings made, does it include when students/ staff win competitions?

PR The Times will have their criteria and The Guardian will have another. You might find you'll be 127th in one league and you might be 135th in another. Yes, they use things like external recognition, and graduate employment statistics. A lot of factors are included in the formula which is probably based on lies, truths and half-truths. It's spurious data to say the least. I think a lot depends on what you want to do. There are people here from industry and there are people here with different agendas and I think largely it comes down to what do you want to do. A lot of my students want to get a job with massive global companies. The conversation I have with them is what do you need to do to get that job and for some of them it's winning competitions and getting recognition. And others want to do their own thing so they don't enter competitions and they're looking at different models – business and creative models about

doing different things. And some of them don't want to get engaged with the world of design at all. The one thing that I think is shocking and doesn't help is, I sat in a thing at The Lighthouse and I was horrified to learn that Scotland is the only country in the UK that doesn't have a cultural creative policy, which I think says a lot really. I don't know if they have one now but they certainly didn't then. It seems to me one of the things that was quite successful was the Six Cities Festival where a lot of money was getting pumped into art and design.

GR But nobody turned up.

PR No that isn't true.

GR It was Scottish parochialness that should've been advertised in the Daily Record. It was so elitist that nobody knew that it was happening.

AUDIENCE It was very badly delivered to the public.

PR I think there was some obvious problems.

GR I think that Scotland has to look at itself and say why did we mess it up. It was a brilliant opportunity that was messed up.

PR I think there were problems with it – I would agree with you about that, but I think there were some great things. We were involved in something on the Mound in Edinburgh that attracted 4,500 people in three days. Now that's alright, you're getting people through and people are talking about things and there were other things happening in Inverness. It was a really fantastic public engagement project. I know we've messed up and it was parochial at times but what we've got now in place of it is a clan gathering in Edinburgh. Bring back the Diaspora for a day in Edinburgh.

AUDIENCE Precisely that – you're raising a culture policy – we do have an architecture policy and we're the only country in Britain that has an architecture policy and we're not making great buildings so don't expect a culture policy to make people excel. The minute you look for guidance or direction from government or state in such matters is the day that you

might as well give up. The discussion this evening struck me that I couldn't care less about design awards and maybe they give you a wee bit of a profile but the best gratification is from doing a good job. It's good to be sitting in a room with your client having a conversation and that's what we need to do more.

NM I think on that note we can think about wrapping it up if there aren't any other comments. The theme that has come out for me is that I may be focusing too much on the big picture and not on the small stuff that is both within our grasp but is also moving in a positive direction. I think its really important that we don't lose sight of that. That, anyway, is what I'm going to take from the discussion, although I had resolved to try and move this in a positive direction, to really think about ways in which we can do that in a concrete but maybe very small way to start with. I'd struggle to get any smaller today but it's interesting that these kind of things often grow out of a discussion. Paul do you want to say anything?

PR I just want to echo that last sentiment that it was great to sit here and have a conversation about design.

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