UNANSWERED LETTERS TO LEON FESTINGER

James Langdon

James Langdon
A School for Design Fiction
℅ Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst
Karl-Tauchnitz-Str. 9–11
D–04107 Leipzig
Germany

Professor Leon Festinger
℅ The New School
66 West 12th Street
New York 10011
U.S.A.

6 January 2018

Dear Professor Festinger

I wrote you a letter of invitation, dated 11 January 2018, to which you did not reply. I can't blame you. I did not tell you the whole truth and I would like to now do so. As I'm sure was obvious to you, my letter was written with a generic template. I wanted to invoke some academic credibility. I wanted you to take me me seriously. Your silence tells me that you saw through the pretense. I am embarrassed, I should have put this right sooner. But I trust in serendipity. I hope that this reaches you in a moment when you are considering your options. I am reassured by the knowledge that you could not have made the moves you have made without being restless and opportunistic.

Last night I watched a video of you being interviewed on television in 1973. I noticed you raise your eyebrows when your work was introduced as "something on the order of an arbitration between thought and conduct." You grinned and chuckled as your interviewer promised you plenty of chance to object to that formulation. When I saw your expression, your self-assured laughter, I was reminded of something. Have you ever noticed, Professor, that in almost every photograph of the composer

John Cage; or the novelist Georges Perec (especially later in his career); they are smiling broadly, or laughing? It sounds ridiculous to say, but I think I see in their faces a peculiar spirit of the twentieth century that only a most rarefied, privileged group of male artists were able to channel. They look liberated, dizzy. They have escaped the storytelling-monkey-brained banality of 'artistic expression' and in the process found themselves just a fraction closer to truth — to reality — than most of us will ever get. As I said, it sounds ridiculous, but I am being sincere. When I saw your face I knew you were part of that special group, and that I had to write this letter.

I am enthralled by the interdisciplinary trajectory of your career. I read how your early work brought laboratory rigour to slippery subjects such as social dynamics and communication. Then came cognitive dissonance, your theory that humans are predisposed to seek reconciliation of contradictory beliefs. Momentous work, and you did it before 40! I read how you proved your theory by covertly joining a domesday cult whose leader believed she was receiving messages from an alien being named Sananda, prophesising that the world was to end, imminently, on December 21, 1954. When the world didn't end you predicted that, despite their doctrine being disproved, the group would remain faithful to it. And you were right! So spectacularly right! Their storytelling-monkey-brains couldn't bear the discontinuity, and they reduced their dissonance by concocting even more fantastic prophesies! I can only imagine the thrill of exemplifying your work with such guile and audacity. Rather than repeat yourself from the security of academia, you turned next to other questions: visual perception, then archaeology, technology, religion ... I am not writing to recite your career back to you, but it's important that you know I am a scholar of your work. I am writing in awe of the radical swerves you have made, and to propose one more to you: I would like to invite you to lead a design school.

I wonder if you have ever given design your attention? Perhaps when you were in Antibes, in the studio of the archaeologist Jacques Tixier, learning first-hand how early humans crafted their hunting tools from flint? Well, those primitive objects already exhibited many of the affordances that we continue to subtilise in our work as designers. Or perhaps in your own laboratory, assembling and modifying technical instruments to track tiny movements of the human eye, you saw how the relation between the subject and the instrument is always producing unexpected friction. As you know better than anyone, moments of malfunction offer the most insight. In any case, I can't resist imagining what your unique mind would make of our practices. Norman Potter subtitled his book 'What is a designer' with three nouns: 'things', 'places', 'messages'. What more is there! He wrote: "It is true that, in the last analysis, every human artefact — whether painting, poem, chair, or rubbish bin — evokes and invokes the inescapable totality of a culture, and the hidden assumptions which condition cultural priorities." I return continually to this sentence, because it is such a succinct flattener. It unites the products of design in every imaginable cultural register: from those that design students tend to admire, to those they tend to dismiss. That phrase, "the last analysis", opens up an expanse of time that I think you would feel comfortable in. Pinned to the studio wall I have a line from an interview with the artist Roni Horn: "I know that most of what's out there in the world is occurring too quickly or too slowly for me to see."

Allow me now to 'set the scene' of my invitation. Or 'prime the space', as we prefer to say. Imagine this, Professor. You are a visitor at our school. You sit down at a lecture. At first it's the usual format: a single speaker monologue in front of rows of chairs, slides projected overhead. After a few minutes, in your peripheral vision, you become aware of the student seated next to you. They take out a notebook, shuffle a little in their seat, and start writing. Momentarily you glance over at them — naturally you are curious to know what they have noted from

the lecture — and what you see is confounding. They are writing directly onto their trousers! The notebook that you glimpsed is not on their lap but on their chair, they are sitting on it! Not wishing to stare you return your attention to the lecture. Some minutes later you notice someone else, seated across from you and a few rows in front. They rustle the wrapper of a chocolate bar, and then put it to their mouth, taking a bite right through the foil! Startled by this strangeness, you watch them continue to chew and swallow the chocolate and its wrapper, their demeanour not once indicating anything out of the ordinary. At this point you are beginning to realise what is going on. Some members of the audience are performers, their actions are scripted! The choreography is by the artist Sofia Hultén, and we present it as kind of ritual — unannounced to new students — at the opening lecture of each semester. There is a specific sequence of actions, believable things that a student might do in a lecture: make notes, eat a snack, hang a jacket over the back of a chair, fall asleep, and so on. But the performers are instructed to make these moves in anomalous spatial or temporal order. As you might just have experienced vicariously though my description, to witness even the most ordinary of gestures apparently break its own causal logic is profoundly unsettling. That is our first important signal. I hope that it intrigues you, Professor, even a little. We learned our sneaky methods from you.

In anticipation of your arrival we have made some efforts toward a new curriculum for designers. My colleague Anton Stuckardt and I are teaching a course on 'Elementary Pataphysics'. It draws on the French author and artist Alfred Jarry, of course, and the quasi-scientific literary tradition that sprouts in his wake. When Jarry wrote "Pataphysics will be, above all, the science of the particular, despite the common opinion that the only science is that of the general ...", he foreshadowed a critical pitfall for designers. To address this we depart from Jarry and introduce students to the English scientist Arthur Worthington, do you know his work? He was a nineteenth-century pioneer of

fluid dynamics. He spent decades hunched over his workbench conducting experiments to observe tiny droplets of milk and mercury splashing on contact with a flat surface. He laboured in darkness, punctuated by regular, instantaneous flashes from the lighting apparatus that he designed to be triggered by each splash. He translated what he saw into an array of wonderfully pure and symmetrical drawings: a morphology of the splash revealed through sheer concentrated effort. Later in his career Worthington pioneered the application of very high speed photography to his work. The results vexed him! His photographs recorded images far too fleeting for his eye ever to have fixated on. The splashes as they appeared to the camera were monstrous, contingent, unrepeatable: each as unique as a fingerprint. Suddenly his drawn geometries revealed themselves as fakes — artifacts of his own perceptual apparatus! His brain had interpolated these idealistic images even before his conscious, scientific self could intervene. What more poetic example can you imagine of the brain's automatic predisposition to resolve? Instead of allowing him to realise that the phenomena he wished to classify were infinite and unknowable, Worthington's brain offered his hand these elegant abstractions. And like the members of the cult you studied, he believed them! I picture his face in the moment he first saw one of these deformed photographic splashes, and what I see is not like your face, Professor; or Cage's, or Perec's! It's to his credit, though, that Worthington was able to endure this dissonance. In the canonical presentation of his work, a lecture at the Royal Institution in London in 1894, he included both his drawings and photographs. For our students, his storytelling is exemplary.

In 'The Human Legacy' you speculatively identified the moment of design's inception when you wrote: "More than two and a half million years ago some early humans had a fantastic, new idea. The essence of that idea seems simple to us today, but it was of monumental significance at that time. It was not necessary to limit themselves to using, as tools, objects that

ordinarily were naturally available in their environment. They could, instead, create objects that were not ordinarily available. If, for example, there was a need for a piece of stone with a sharp edge to cut meat or animal skin or wood, they could try to manufacture such an object." It's a thrilling moment of clarity, Professor. But there is one thing I have never understood about your account. You described how some rare examples of these earliest designed objects were deliberately worked into symmetrical forms, or decoratively coloured for no apparent functional advantage. In the book you seemed to find these aesthetic affordances inexplicable in evolutionary terms. If you could only spend a working day in a design school! These are matters of considerable nuance! The aesthetic labour invested in these objects must have conferred on their designers a communicative, or pedagogical, or status advantage. If I might be so bold — and I hesitate — perhaps you can learn something from us …

There's a striking paragraph in Graham Harman's book 'The Quadruple Object', in which he writes about an ordinary British postbox as a stack of its qualities. From the incidental — the patination of one particular postbox — to the defining — its redness, familiar dimensions and materiality. I have had confusing experiences trying to employ this text as a teaching resource for graphic designers! Harman's method of sorting out the defining and the incidental features that identify an object seems to be relevant to the practice of designing graphic 'identities' to represent organisations and entities. But I have consistently failed to convey this to students. That is until recently, when an inspired student, Christian Janisch, instinctively synthesised Harman's stack of qualities in a study of an early twentieth century German Catholic priest who had dedicated his working life to pomology! The priest, Korbinian Aigner, had made hundreds of beautiful paintings of apples, published, many years after his death, in a volume displaying a most wonderful typology of varietals and titled 'Äpfel und Birnen' — 'apples and pears'. Christian prepared a deconstructed visualisation of Aigner's apples:

their shapes, colours, patterns, and naming conventions. The work was presented as a matrix of possible apple qualities, with the potential at once to define the boundaries of apple-ness, and to go beyond it — not merely into the territory of the pear, but much further, to generate speculative apples with compound names like 'Red rocketing Hogan with crackles and lines', 'Green chamois exchange quoin', and 'White fabled rat gherkin'. They are apples — they demonstrably contain only qualities found in apples — and yet we perceive them as abstract and unfamiliar. They produce friction for our storytelling-monkey-brains.

Please excuse the length that this letter has already run to. Here I am trying to prove myself to you, anxious that you might find this invitation foolish, and yet I scan back over what I have written and find myself quoting artists, scientists, and philosophers when instead I might simply have outlined our offer to you. We — my colleagues and I — invite you to lead our school. As a token of our sincerity, we have made some provisions for your arrival.

First, your office. I read that you like to smoke. While not a smoker myself, I must admit that I find the image of pedagogical clarity emerging from the smoke-filled air of the classroom very evocative. We are presently planning a new purpose-built campus — I enclose some renderings — but regulations are now very strict in prohibiting smoking in public buildings. We think we have a clever solution: a custom-made extraction system concealed inside a backgammon table. Yes, I have done my research, Professor!

As regards furniture, Norman Potter — I mentioned him — asked a question of students in 'What is a designer': 'What is intrinsically wrong about bookcases, or questionable?' The answer — a rhetorical point for him, I believe, but probably rather cryptic for students — was that knowledge cannot be confined. In this spirit we are constructing your bookshelves in Potter's stick furniture

style. These skeletal structures have no backs or sides, in fact no solid planes at all — the books sit on the closely aligned stick-supports, making the delimiting 'shelf' itself redundant. A suggestive metaphor I hope.

For your desk, a small but significant object: a lamp, designed by a colleague Rosie Eveleigh. This is our most tender offering to you, by way of homage to Arthur Worthington. It symbolises the tragic intensity of Worthington's gaze, and the emergence of his enlightenment in a woozy moment of asymmetry. We thought alabaster would be a fitting material for the base, please do send your comments on that.

I could go on. There is so much to say but I don't want to scare you away. Allow me, finally, to add that I fear this project will never be complete without you. Feel free to make demands and place obstacles in my way. I will gladly attempt to overcome them.

Yours hopefully, excitedly

James Langdon

PS. I enclose some images for your information and comment:

* A plan of our proposed campus by Peter Nencini. This is not finalised and we would be delighted to discuss it with you;

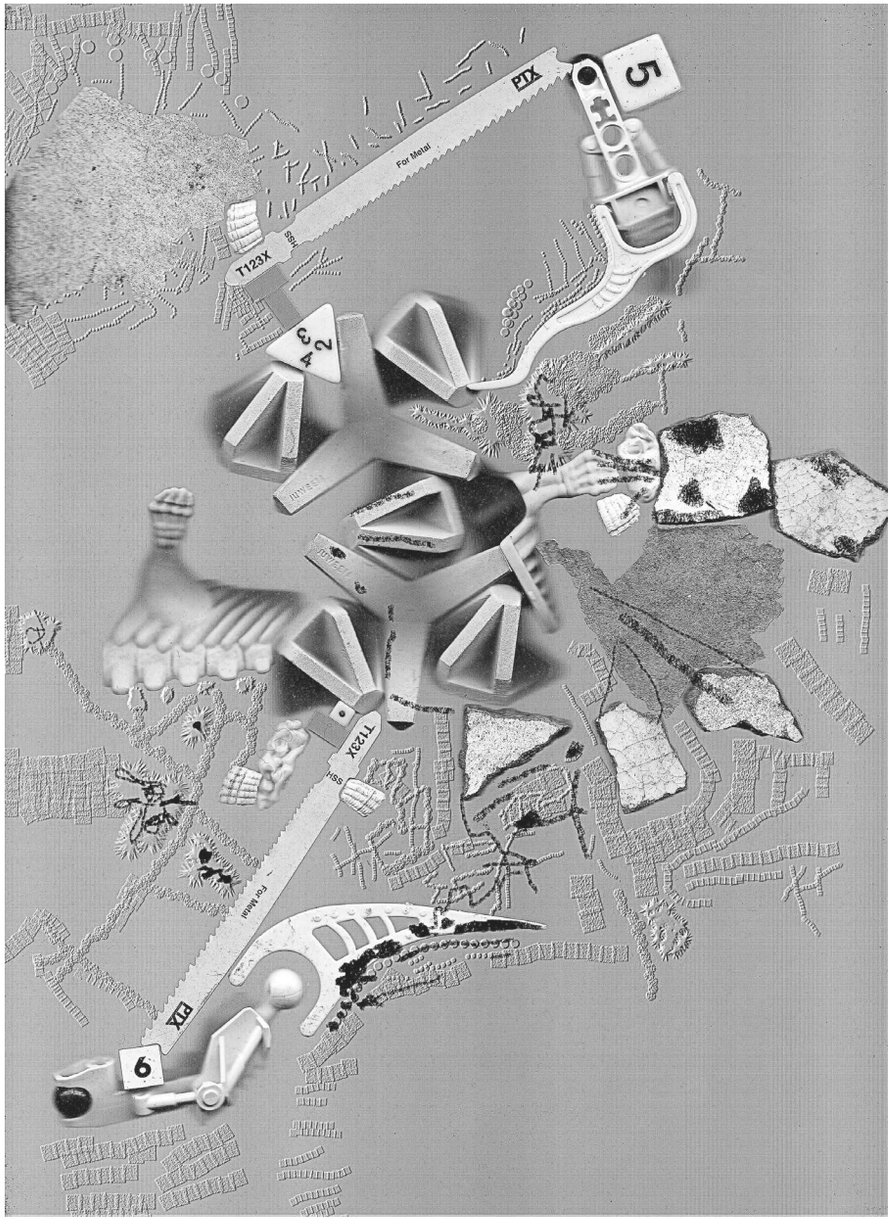
* The design for your desk lamp that I mentioned, by Rosie Eveleigh;

* Some speculative pomology by Christian Janisch;

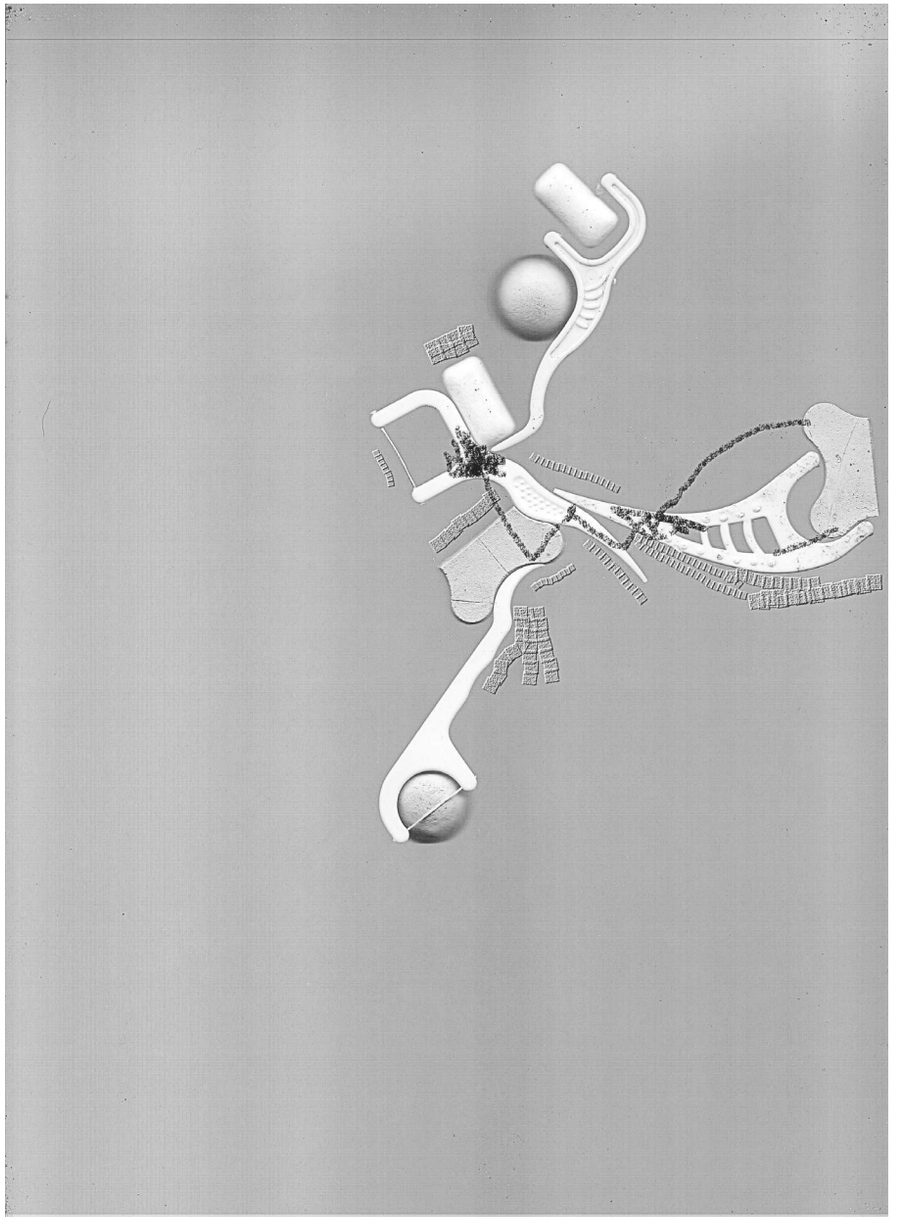
* A portrait of you, swerving, by Simon Manfield. I know I am getting ahead of myself, but I thought we might use this in our prospectus?



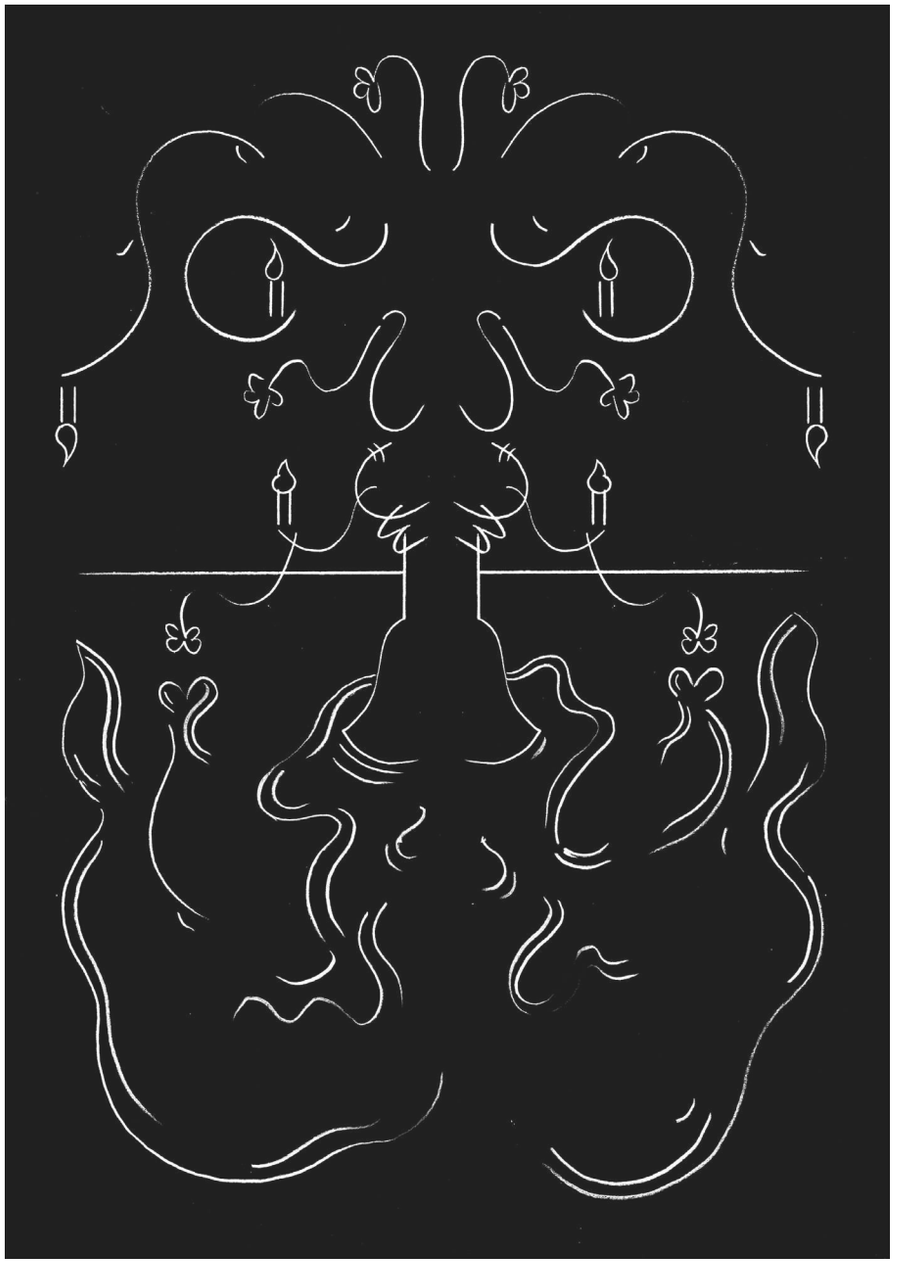
Portrait of Leon, Swerving by Simon Manfield (2017)



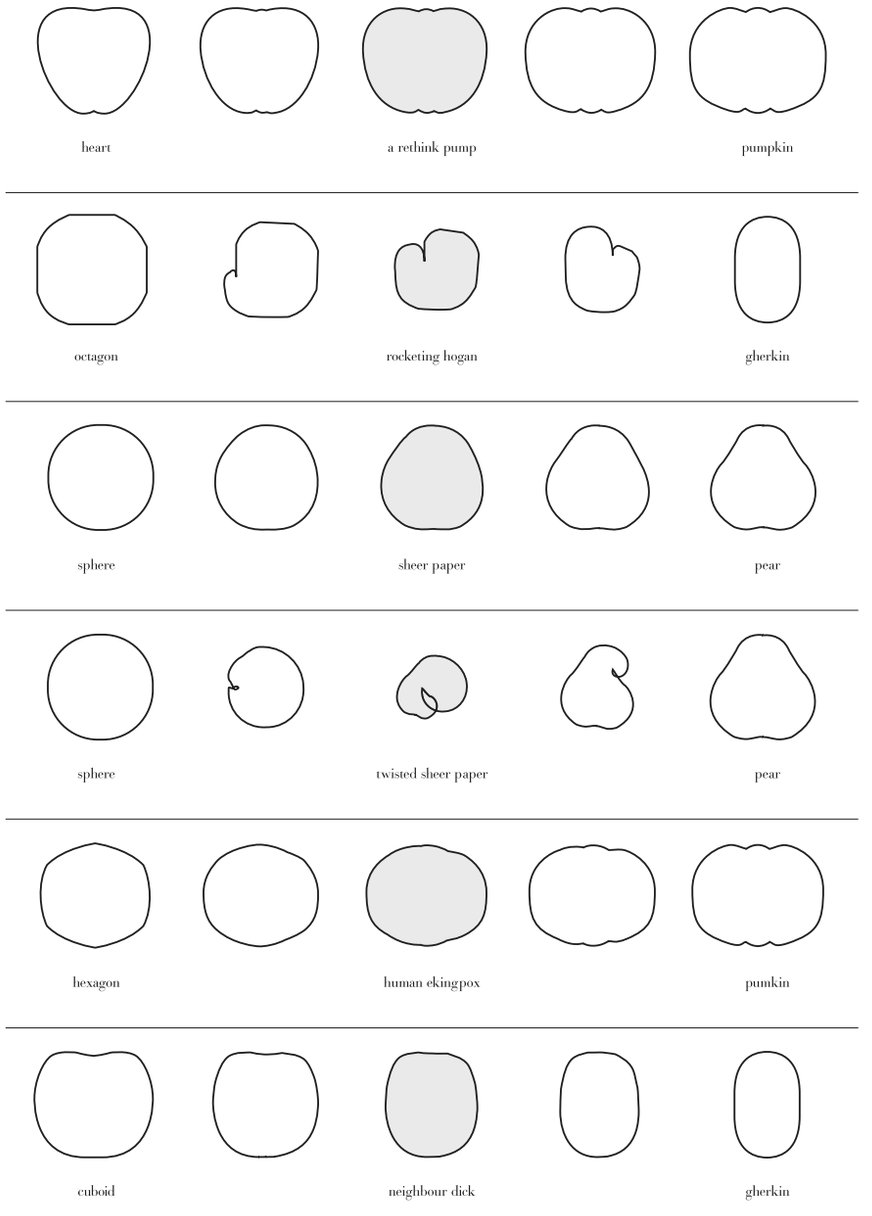
Proposals for A School for Design Fiction Campus
by Peter Nencini (2016)



Proposals for A School for Design Fiction Campus
by Peter Nencini (2016)



Design for Leon’s desk lamp by Rosie Eveleigh (2017)



Examples of Speculative Pomology by Christian Janisch (2016)



dotted flames lined flames



brindled flames crackled



striped flames dots



annular flames dots and flames



crackled lined flames



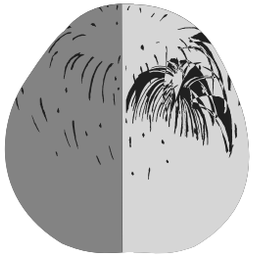
brindled flames dotted flames

Examples of Speculative Pomology by Christian Janisch (2016)



White rapid coupe with lemon annular flames and stripes

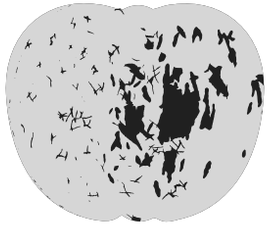
A homogenous chamois rocketing hogan



Chamois red sheer paper with lemon white flames



Red white exchange quoin with green dot-lined flames



A lemon rethink pump with red-brown stripes and dots



Lemon earth quince with extended striped flames

Examples of Speculative Pomology by Christian Janisch (2016)

UNANSWERED LETTERS TO LEON FESTINGER (CONT.)

James Langdon

James Langdon
A School for Design Fiction
℅ Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst
Karl-Tauchnitz-Str. 9–11
D–04107 Leipzig
Germany

Professor Leon Festinger
℅ Katz's Delicatessen
205 East Houston Street (corner of Ludlow St)
New York 10002
U.S.A.

10 March 2018

Dear Leon

I don't know if I will ever post this to you. It is nonetheless worth stating here that I do realise, and have realised since before we began our correspondence, that you are dead. I hope that you will excuse me suddenly writing so literally, considering — I have to admit — that our school also in fact does not exist.

I write you from the foyer of the 'Beyond Change' conference on design education. I have found a lot here that I want to share with you.

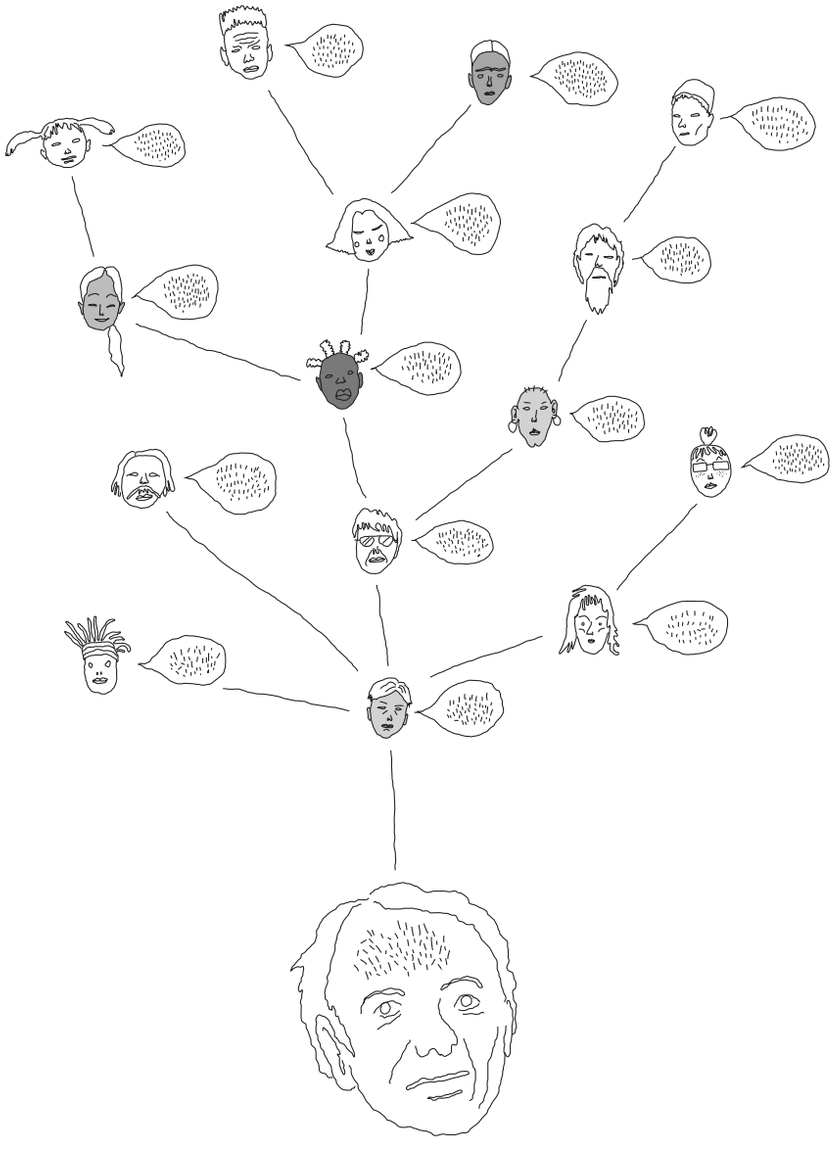
I want to tell you that I've come to regret sending you the portrait. Not only was it presumptuous on my part, but somehow I overlooked the possibility that you might interpret its representation of your trajectory as linear — an impression I never meant to give. I had conceived of your hair branching vigorously — with electricity! — in infinite directions, unified only by your momentum, your irresistible interdisciplinary swerve!

It's no trivial matter, this threat of the linear. I recall a line from Gilles Deleuze in which he recommends that one should have grass growing in one's head, not a tree. He's talking categorically, about thought, but the metaphor applies especially to the canon and its stifling hold on education. One of my students, Sun Young Oh, made this drawing of Deleuze's comparison:



As appealing as it is, there's a problem with the grass. A problem of propagation, so to speak. And it's happening right now, on this page. Every approving reference to Deleuze's idea — whether to its poetry or its Freudian critique — ironically contributes, in the aggregate, to reproducing the tree and not the grass!

Sara Ahmed, whose name has come up frequently here at the conference, objects to these politics of academic citation. She says "I would describe citation as a rather successful reproductive technology, a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies." Those bodies are maintaining an inert, Anglocentric culture of knowledge dissemination: the tree again. Such conundrums have kept you in my thoughts these days, Leon. I'm asking myself how to channel your spirit, your swerve, without — to force the arboreal metaphor — letting your roots constrain us.



Drawing by Sun Young Oh (2018)

In Stanley Schachter's memoir for you he wrote that 'The Human Legacy', the book that marked your transition out of the laboratory into the archaeological field, is one of the few 'non-banal' examples that he knows of interdisciplinary practice in the social sciences. 'Non-banal' may not sound like a particularly flattering description of your achievement, but I think he meant it as profound praise. (I understand that you knew each other, so perhaps some humour is lost on me here.)

Let me bring that commentary up-to-date, and in relation to design. You won't have seen Alex Coles's recent book, 'The Transdisciplinary Studio'. Coles invokes Paul Rabinow and Félix Guattari, and casts himself in the role of the ethnographic participant observer, describing his interactive visits to the studios of a number of contemporary artists and designers. The book's thesis is simple: "a significant shift in the development of the studio towards a model in which traditional boundaries are exceeded has occurred over the past decade and a half." Mere forrays between established disciplines are inconsequential in Coles's transdisciplinary model. His introduction promises moves that will redefine boundaries, if not make them entirely redundant. It sounds exciting, until it gradually emerges that Coles is actually talking about categorically unremarkable design processes. He describes, as if they were unprecedented transgressions, how a furniture designer also makes exhibitions! How a graphic design studio organises events! How an artist designs objects, interiors, and buildings! In the same studio!

The problem is that such boundaries are, well, Stanley would find them banal. They require hardly any intellectual or technical dexterity to transgress. It's ironic that despite the ethnographic posturing, Coles seems to miss the fact that these are everyday processes, essentially familiar to all socially conversant designers. My colleagues and I joke about the book whenever the word transdisciplinary comes up in conversation. Gesturing to the playground game of rubbing our stomachs whilst patting

our heads, we exclaim "If Alex Coles could see this!" I should stop. I'm being unfair.

But you see my point, don't you Leon? Your swerve from the academy to the field to the laboratory to the excavation site is the essential motif for our school. It's why I crave your unique perspective. I want our students to see the potential of the swerve. Not just to swerve into other branches of art and design, but into neuroscience, or anthropology, or artificial intelligence. To be equipped to contribute in these areas of knowledge production.

At a presentation this morning, the conference was shown many extraordinary architectural projects for staging education outside the established institutions. Temporary, ad-hoc schools appeared before us: floating on a lake; inserted into pockets of urban space; in inflatable transparent domes; all documented in beautiful photographs. The hard edges, the typical disciplinary walls, seemed seductively to disappear into irrelevance. Until an alert voice in the audience spoke up! The tart criticism: 'Designers today just see education as another element for their portfolios!' I took it as a warning*.

This is all I have for now, Leon. I know I shouldn't expect to hear from you, but will you send me a signal? I am leaving the conference. I will walk through the park and look to the grass, the bushes, and the trees for guidance. I am receptive.

Yours,

James Langdon

* The alert voice was Francisco Laranjo, quoted here from memory.