

# “Kick Out the Jams”: Creative Strategies to Kick Start the Illustrator’s Imagination

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**Abstract.** The accident has long been acknowledged as a catalyst for original thought and can offer new insights to the practitioner wishing to develop *things* which have never been contemplated or seen before. If we accept Virilio’s (2007) description of the accident as “*profane miracle*”, how can we instigate such mishaps, or even recognise their potential in the increasingly homogeneous digital landscape in which Illustrators find themselves? Is it even possible to override the restrictive mental parameters we are preconditioned to accept?

This paper will aim to locate ways in which students of illustration can thrive by instigating accidents or disrupting the inhibitive characteristics of the technologies that surround us. I intend to seek out contemporary illustrators and investigate how they *jump start* their own creative process in order to develop a repertoire of strategies that reveal, or disclose, ways in which *eureka* moments can occur.

It will investigate whether the D.I.Y mind-set (forever associated with punk attitudes and tastes) that encouraged experiments, risk and feedback, is still relevant to current illustration practices. It will point towards ways in which art educators can incite innovative visual thinking and nurture image makers that stand in opposition to algorithmical mediocrity; Illustrators match-fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## 1 Introduction

*“In my view, the accident is positive. Why? Because it reveals something important that we would not otherwise be able to perceive. In this respect, it is a profane miracle.”* (Virilio 2005, p.63).

The accident, and the chaos it brings about, has long been a catalyst for cultural artefacts of various forms. It is within the indulgent spaces of exploration and experimentation that new potential modes of expression and meaning begin to form. But the *miracle* Paul Virilio describes, and the *profanities* it often brings about, are potentially harmful, unwelcomed and aggravating events, seemingly at odds with the demands of the commercial artist. The pressures of professional practice and the expectations of eager clients are surely too pressing for *in-demand* Illustrators to foster unpredictable and reckless creative habits?

The eulogic inscription “*Creativity is mistakes*” hangs within the studio of Grayson Perry, a British artist whose highly decorative and socially charged artworks appear to fit within, if not often clearly resemble, the Illustrator’s oeuvre. Theorists and practitioners have long viewed the accident as a generative occurrence from Duchamp’s game-changing ready-mades through to Ballard’s auto-erotic fable *Crash* it is clear to perceive ways in which the great imaginative leaps are made when artists of all fields welcome and embrace chance.

*“Chance plays a large part in the (illustration) process, and the judgments made are like the judgments of the gambler at the roulette table, there is a strategy, but it’s strategy based on the acceptance of chance and unpredictability. A process of rapid interpretation of events through marks on the page as they unfold through the image making process.”* (Barwick 2015, p. 49).

Barwick identifies chance as key propellant in the creative combustion necessary to succeed as an Illustrator. He asserts that many illustrators still use tools and materials to force error and to create unpredictability as a part of their image making process. This paper will look to identify ways in which practicing illustrators still embrace error and chance as key motivational force driving their imaginations.

It will also distinguish between self-initiated works and the professional commissions; the former frequently described as *play*, whereas the latter *work*. This paper will investigate how this symbiotic relationship functions and its implications in the advent of increasingly rapid means of image composite and distribution. The material gathered will point towards ways art educators can incite innovative visual thinking and nurture students in readiness for the high-octane image economy they will soon find themselves.

## 2 The *Happy* accident

*“One day I was punching holes with a hole puncher into a stack of paper, and I thought of a bookworm and so I created a story called *A Week with Willi the Worm*. Then later my editor, who didn’t like the idea of a worm, suggested a caterpillar and I said “*Butterfly!*” And the rest is history.”* (Carle, 2016).

Eric Carle’s endearing origin myth for *The Hungry caterpillar* recounts how a careless action led to arguably the most celebrated and ubiquitous illustrated picture book ever produced. It emphasises the necessity of chance to stimulate creative thought and bring about ground breaking and visionary design solutions. As Illustrators, we all strive to produce distinct, engaging imagery which satisfies a perpetual demand for innovation. So, the deeply held conviction that *happy* accidents can instigate creative insights should be integral to an Illustrator’s process identity, right?

Marion Deuchars describes her practice as “*fine tuned into trying to make accidents*” a creative endeavour that echoes with many other Illustrators interviewed for this paper. Deuchars has since transformed this pursuit into the successful series, *Let’s Make Great Art Books*, which dispenses ways in which the unpredictable nature of materials can stimulate visual innovation.

The intentional propagation of accidents is also present in the works of collage/digital artist Chris Haughton whose practice relies upon, and is indeed defined by, the mistakes he can conjure; revealing “every piece of visual I do has come about from accident”. Haughton’s artwork effortlessly moves between physical paper cutting and digital assemblage leaving multiple opportunities for mistakes along the way (Fig.1); “any breakthrough has been through accidents or ‘falls-on-the-ground-upside-down’ sort of thing” (Ibid). In one such example Haughton describes how an accidental inversion of scanned paper led to the defining colour treatment of his award-winning picture book *‘We have A Plan’* (2014); “I made the splash in dark paper, scanned it in and then, when tweaking with settings, the tones reversed in negative. So, I went with this.” (Ibid). Both Haughton and Deuchars control and manage conditions necessary to instigate accidents, by immersing themselves within an environment where random and unpredictable events can occur.



**Fig.1.** Paper collage development of *We have A Plan* by Chris Haughton (2014).

Eric Kessels's *Failed it!* (2016) provides a manifesto and lexicon for visual strategies such as these. The images collated within are inherently unwelcomed occurrences that could initially foster disillusionment but are rather transposed, reassigned and celebrated as worthy cultural artefacts. Kessels’s curation illuminates our understanding of the relationship between creativity and failure and points to ways in which the uncanny and unstable nature of such visual artefacts are eagerly appropriated by creative practitioners of many disciplines.

*“Forget what you know about objects...nothing will limit creativity more than sticking to what is appropriate or usual.”* (Kessels 2016, p.104).

Kessels’s pronouncement rings true but provides a conundrum for contemporary Illustrators wishing to establish *control of our mediums* and *have strong concepts* (Zhu, 2014). Fiona Woodcock points to the *initial* engagement with a visual problem as a moment to pursue the *unexpected stuff*; *“I always say that I do my best work when there is time at the start to play and experiment in order to create visual ideas etc.”* (Woodcock, 2017) . The contradiction with Kessels’s assertion, in relation to Illustration methods, being that a conventional Illustrator’s practice may adopt an experimental method (if time permits) but must frequently apply a consistent visual language, in order to reassure potential clients and thrive. The impulse to refine and re-present identifiable motifs, tropes and gestures within a portfolio is therefore significant, but could potentially limit the extent and scope of an Illustrator’s ambition when engaging with a live project. Increasingly scant financial and time constraints very often override the motivation to experiment, and indeed when such suggestions are made to Illustrators, the artist is frequently perplexed.

A recent job for Pete Fowler left him bereft of the conventional structure and guidelines necessary to provide solutions. When he inquired what deliverables and format the client required he was frustrated; *“They were like we don’t give you briefs. We like to see what you do.”* Leaving him to inquire *“Are you on drugs?”* (Fowler, 2017). For an artist like Pete Fowler the distinction between personal work and the professional commissions he undertakes is distinct. The sanctuary provided within the notional sketchbook provide the Illustrator with a platform to test, probe, shake and explode ideas in a temperature-controlled environment; a place to play without the pressures of demanding clients or pressing deadlines. Fowler describes his *“own stuff”* (Ibid), a universe populated, and driven by, subcultural references, as what keeps him *“sane”* (Ibid) (Fig.2). Whereas a professional brief is a financial engagement and commitment to focus the illustrator’s imagination to a particular design problem not of their own selection. It frequently involves compromise and negotiation, parameters not obviously apparent within self-initiated works.

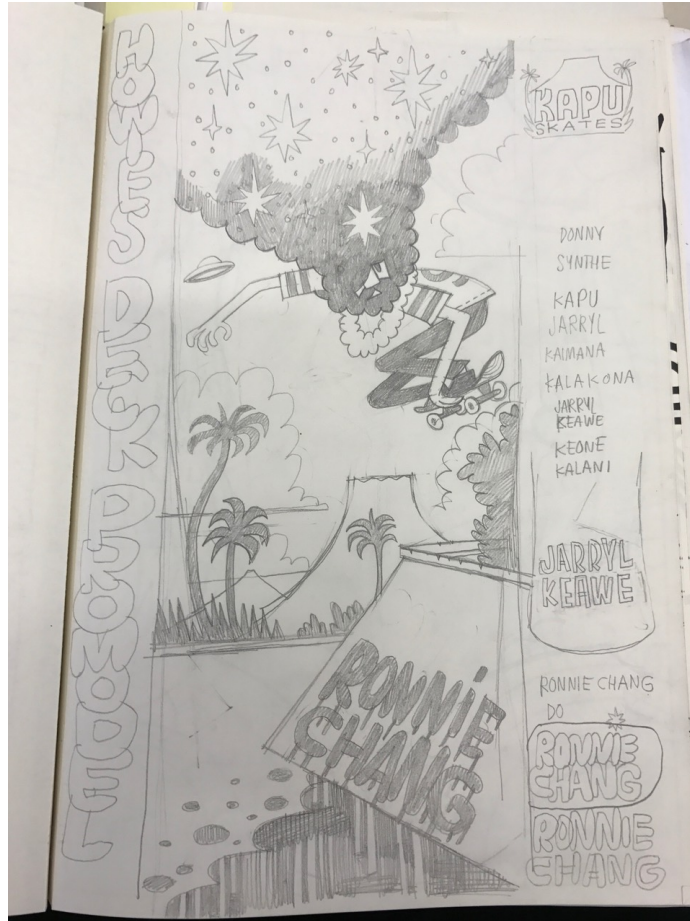


Fig. 2. Sketchbook excerpt by Pete Fowler s (2018)

### 3 Gimme Danger!

However, Josh Cochran describes a perverse pleasure in commissions that do just that, i.e. thrive on the unpredictable. During the 2014 U.S. Open tennis championship Cochran was commissioned to respond visually to tournament events by improvising upon a 60ft billboard elevated high above the city. *The Story of the Open* (2014) was an open brief only restricted by the parameters of an enormous, and highly public, canvas. Describing the process Cochran (2014) recalls; “I like to have the feeling that it could fail on an immense level, I have to have that fear...that risk, because if I don’t have it the piece turns out boring, or there is nothing interesting with it.” Cochran relishes this precariousness in order to retain his excitement and motivation for a commission, revealing; “when a project begins and the piece is terrible, in a bad place and I have to save it. (These are) the mind games I play with myself. It’s a terrible way to work!” (Ibid).

The same indifference and nonchalant acceptance of risk is also present in the works of Noma Bar whose recent lecture revealed ways in which chance observations, and their recognition, directly inform live professional commissions. Bar's portrait work relies on the witty alignment of *negative*, or as he describes *positive*, space in order to load his pictures with meanings and codes that unravel on inspection, these thought provoking visual puzzles are often initiated by "*something going wrong, that makes it more interesting*" (Bar, 2017). Bar's frequent international travels give rise to stop/start stuttered commissions, partially worked upon in different time zones, the process gives rise to errors, hesitation and mistakes. In one such example (Fig.3) a Photoshop layer unintendedly, concealed components of a Samuel Jackson portrait; "*suddenly the hair was like a falafel ball, Pffmph, falling down, and covering his eyes, and I realized you don't actually need eyes.*" (Ibid).



**Fig. 3.** *Pulp Fiction* for *Empire Magazine* by Noma bar (2015).

Bar gives many examples of ways in which daily experiences and engagement with the *real world* directly inform the creative decisions he makes. These include generic toilet signage informing an image of Michael Jackson (2008), and a portrait of Steve Jobs for *Wired* magazine (2011) in which Bar didn't even have to look beyond a doodle on the

surface of his laptop lid for inspiration. Sarah Illenberger is not only inspired by her surroundings but chooses to incorporate such visual prompts as props within her design solutions (Fig.4); a practice in which seemingly ordinary, neutral household objects metamorphose into loaded visual signals, reassigned via “*a process of rapid interpretation*” (Barwick, 2014).

However, the seemingly serendipitous acts that Illenberger and Bar employ are not the product of romance or whimsy, but rather constant and heightened observation in which the illustrators’ inquisitive nature questions the accepted, seemingly mundane, hierarchy of signs that surround us; recognising the transformative potential of a mistake. Commissioning editors and clients trust such Illustrators to “*spin the roulette wheel*” (Barwick 2014, p.49) in recognition of their particular expertise, phenomena David Pye (1968, p.345) coined “*the workmanship of risk*”, i.e. unpredictable yet idiosyncratic and crafted, honed solutions. In this way Illustrators challenge accepted logical rhythms and establish conspicuous identities based upon defamiliarisation, persistence and *graft*.



**Fig. 4.** *Neon Magazine Die Große Sex Umfrage* for *Neon Magazin* by Sarah Illenberger (2007).

## 4 Process as motivational impulse

*“My imaginations not speaking to me at the moment. We’ve had a little falling out.”* (Fowler 2017).

A reoccurring observation in interviews gathered for this paper is an engagement with unfamiliar materials and processes as a means of breaking habits and stimulating creative thought. Rather than working towards an imagined ‘*Golden glow*’, i.e. an unrealised artistic idea as characterised by Perry (2014), many Illustrators take a more a pragmatic approach to unearth new visual pathways. Fowler’s (2017) creative process is in opposition to the pursuit of such a shining cerebral construct; *“I don’t think that way. My ideas come from doing stuff, the graft”* frequently attempting to disengage his imagination and the predictable ideas it proffers, by immersing himself in diverse and unfamiliar techniques that he finds fascinating. Fowler’s practice is motivated by curiosity and ways in which new materials re-translate his pictorial universe. This same urgency is echoed by Deuchars (2017); *“I use materials I don’t like or are familiar with to encourage this process (idea generation) and constantly argue with my logical brain which tries to tell me what is right and what is wrong”*, frequently working on multiples in order to exploit this:

*“I think the hardest thing when making work is knowing when something is finished... I work on multiples, as I find this helps me finish at least one of them. I feel less precious about the artwork, knowing I could ruin one and I’d have another one to work on. It helps psychologically!”* (Deuchars 2017).

Reliance upon accidents and engaging with unfamiliar materials takes perseverance and the same audacious self-belief reflected in many other cultural forms, Kessels (2016, p.116) reminding us creativity is *“always risky”* and as practitioners we should *“dare to be disliked”*. This is best exemplified by Tony Moon’s legendary punk rock pronouncement *NOW FORM A BAND* (*Sideburns* fanzine, 1976) (Fig.5);



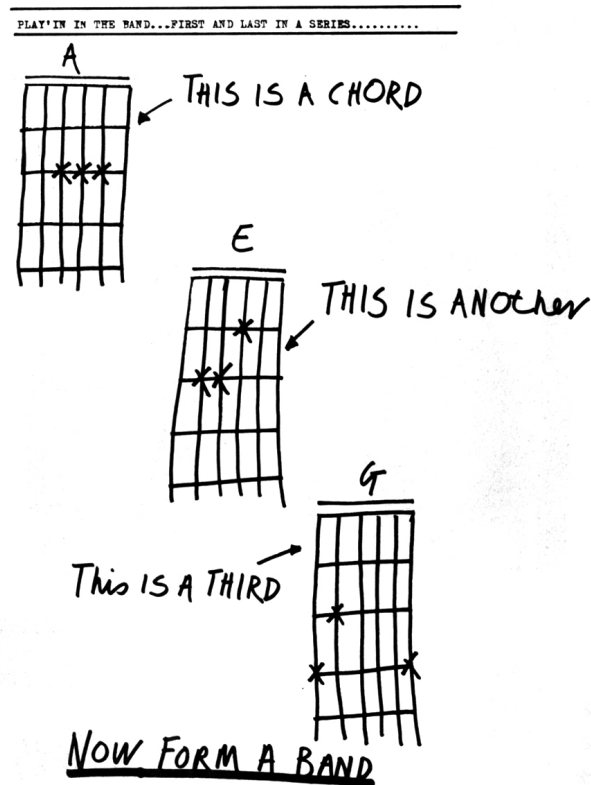


Fig. 5. NOW FORM A BAND by Tony Moon, *Sideburns* fanzine (1976)

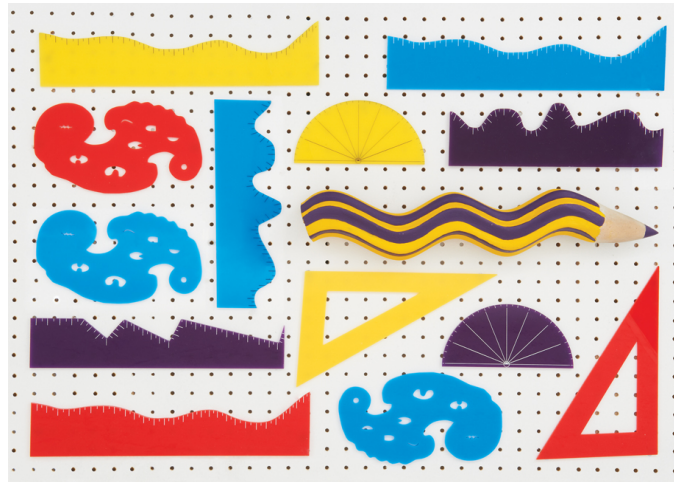
Vitriolic and crude, two-minute, three chord punk songs were viewed as a disgrace by the hegemonic taste setters of the period but are now rightly lauded as spontaneous reactions to monotony and boredom; defined by their perceived limitations and creative energy. Fowler's initial illustration forays reflected this same resilience and determination, and were a direct reaction to his own experience of fine art education and the dominant hierarchies it espoused; informed by "the echoes of punk... We wanted to make stuff and enjoy it. Be more immediate!" (Fowler, 2017).

## 5 Accidents and Play

A direct, systematic approach to generating visual accidents is found in the physical tools developed by Simon Cheadle's 'Make Mistakes' project (2013) (Fig.6);

*"I wanted the project to explore what I thought creativity was (e.g. exploring uncharted territory, finding new ways of thinking and making for yourself and others) and so hit upon this idea of creating a system, a set of instructions, processes and tools that would encourage that...to make mistakes, go off course."* (Cheadle, 2017).

Cheadle's altruistic tools have been shared and applied to multiple diverse artworks, but most clearly resonate as physical memoir, i.e. encouraging us to embrace accidents and risk as a means of transforming and enhancing creative production.



**Fig. 6.** *Make Mistakes Project* by Simon Cheadle (2013)

Cheadle's amusingly absurd offerings celebrate play and its unpredictable consequences, they exist as signs to point away from the preconceived and formulaic, encouraging you to "follow a trail of thought and then if isn't right, reverse quickly" (Cheadle, 2018).

Very often a creative path leads to a dead end but on re-inspection offers new unforeseen insights; as Michael DeForge (2016) recounts; "I tend to find a lot of my ideas come out...by accident. I'll draw something and realize, Oh. This might be something I want to explore later on...it just looked right. I can never tell how I actually got there". Ben Newman (2017) describes his creative endeavours as anything but direct, rather "a plate of spaghetti", that must be frustrating pursued to across his plate. An Illustrator's self-initiated works are often driven by a similar compulsion, enthusiasm and passion, to test what is possible, pursue that spaghetti and have fun.

Illustrator's use bizarre strategies to de-familiarise themselves and break apart from conventional ways of seeing, this can include adopting child-like or frequently absurd, and seemingly irrational behaviour; "It would be great to record the running commentary when creating as I think it would sound slightly mad!" (Deuchars, 2017), and "sometimes (I) sing or imagine I'm drunk while I draw, just to get some silly into my pen" (Horse, 2018).



**Fig. 7.** *Chuck Berry (Accidental placement of stencil)* by Jonny Hannah. Cited by the artist during a lecture at The Arts University Bournemouth, UK (2017).

Jonny Hannah (2017) believes you need to “*make a mess*” to be truly creative and is never happier than when immersed in the visual territory of his own construction (Fig.7). When testing the physical and performative potential of his practice he recalls; “*we didn't know what we were doing, dressing up, mucking about and having a laugh*”. Such self-initiated projects are often described as playful and fun, they become a vital space in which the Illustrators passions and associations form and intersect; Fowler (2017) describing such essential activity as *disengaging with the world and engaging with yourself*. Likewise, Ping Zhu (2014) encourages artist's to “*go outside, see something new or expose yourself to something that you don't have any idea about*” i.e. get lost.

## 6 Revealing Accidents



Fig. 8. Double page spread artwork taken from *Frontier 4* by Ping Zhu (2014)

*Frontier 4* (Fig.8) is an illustrated journal in which Ping Zhu reveals the scribbled, incoherent drawings and random marks that surround a professional illustrators desk, imagery very much at odds with the elegant and technically accomplished outcomes found in her portfolio. Zhu (2014) recounts, “(I was) seeing if I could come up with something by accident instead of planned. With commercial work, it’s so easy to follow the assignment and the rules that you forget what it’s like to do something without thinking... I don’t want to be able to rely on assignments to make work”. *Frontier 4* showcases half-complete meanderings and doodles in opposition to “controlled illustration” (Ibid), i.e. the habitual and potentially restrictive requirements of a professional career. For Zhu, the improvised, manic activity found in *Frontier 4* is a cathartic practice which nourishes her professional work.

*“Everyone has a friend with a perfectly manicured front yard – flowers in bright, neat rows, neatly clipped hedges and artfully positioned pots. But their backyard is the complete opposite: an untidy, neglected mess, with a haphazard jumble of gardening tools, weeds and overgrown plants.”*  
(Kessels, 2016, p.157).

Kessels’s metaphor for the machinations of the creative process provide insight into how practitioners often segregate R+D from their polished commercial products. Such experiments often occur in a concealed private space and rarely emerge during professional engagements (other than draft and production drawings). These experiments could reveal perceived flaws and inconsistencies to commissioning editors who require a commodified, consistent visual approach to match client expectations within limited time frames. Industry demands place emphasis on a solution rather than the narration, or development, of an Illustrator’s creative journey.

However, examples such as *Frontier 4* not only offer insights into the motivations and enthusiasms of an illustrator (their *backyard*), but also enhance the story or mythology associated with that particular individual; a valuable resource in relation to the insatiable demand social media places on celebrity. Cochran's *The Story of the Open* commission (2014) also emphasizes ways in which the illustrator's potentially haphazard process is of increasing value to clients eager to establish an authentic back story or *noise*.

The advent of digital tools and rapid systems of distribution provides contradictory means with which to engage with, or negate, this aspect of the Illustrator's profile, the very procedural nature of digital processes often accused of limiting creative possibilities via the adoption of mannerism. Fowler (2017) believes it is "*healthy to pull the curtain back... to show your arse, so to speak*" but is wary of "*people's pretend lives on social media*" (Ibid) and an overly curated backyard void of grit and grime.

## 7 Command Z

Daniel Benneworth-Gray (2015) uses a *Creative Review* opinion piece to challenge the perception that sophisticated, rational design decisions should always eclipse the unconscious accident. In his example a mug falling on a computer keyboard triggers an array of software functions which rearrange carefully crafted design components;

*"I take a moment to see what has happened and appreciate the uncanniness. A couple of elements are missing, something has reappeared. Have things moved? Changed size? It's hard to tell. But it's interesting. It's ... oh. Hang on. It's better."* (Benneworth-Gray, 2015).

Where upon Benneworth-Gray is left of ponder his preconceptions of the creative process; "*Is this design only better off because I punched myself in the face? Should I punch myself in the face again? Should I always be punching myself in the face?*" What this self-coined *graphic accidentalist*, and many illustrators, have come to realize is that violence is not the answer, it's the artist's recognition, then translocation of the event, that counts; "*you just have to remember to look*" (Kessels, 2016, p.162).

However, with the development of increasingly refined and infinitely manipulative tools, in which opportunities to adapt and correct design decisions accelerate, will future students of Illustration recognize the value accept of such fertile opportunities? If we agree with Kessels (2016, p.104) that "*nothing will limit creativity more than sticking to what is appropriate or usual.*" then the current homogenization of digital platforms necessary for the production and distribution of illustrations could lead us towards an increasingly "*slick and seamless image world*" (Laidler, 2017, p.63) increasingly less forgiving or able to disrupt. Nonetheless, as culture and technology evolve, so must the latent accident (*a la* Virilio) and the inquisitive, eager student of Illustration must pursue "*opportunities to spin the roulette wheel*" (Barwick, 2014, p.49) when they surface.

## 8 SNAP!

Sometimes a *real* accident can occur. Not instigated or choreographed but an unexpected and painful event. Jack Sachs's creative journey was spurred on by a potentially career ending *unhappy* catastrophe;

*"In the summer before I started the final year of my illustration degree, I was at a party and some loser tripped me over onto a wine glass. A big shard of the glass embedded itself in the wrist of my right hand—my drawing hand. Doctors were telling me I might never regain the use of my hand properly. In a codeine-induced haze, I decided to start playing with 3D software as a way of making images to carry on with my degree."* (Sachs, 2016).

The origin mythology associated with current Illustration wunderkind Sachs provides conclusive, if painful, evidence to support the claims made in this paper. Sachs's fun and engaging practice leads a vanguard of contemporary Illustrators repurposing 3D modelling software, a form previously associated with animated 3D feature films and info graphics. Sachs's work draws our attention to ways in which 3D Illustration has been limited to animated features or games and injects the form with wit and humour.



**Fig. 9.** Excerpt from *Make Do* (2014) by Jack Sachs. An animated film available at <https://vimeo.com/102382623>

A precursory work, *Make Do* (Fig.9) was an animated symbolic description on Sachs's final year at university in which he had decided to construct an elaborate mechanical cabinet with levers and pulley systems to illustrate a nerve relay system, but also his own physical recovery. As Sachs recalls; *"this required engineering knowledge and skill way beyond that of an injured 20-year-old illustrator. I had loads of fun making it, but the outcome was an absolute disaster, none of it worked. I got a really bad grade and decided to stick to CGI and drawing"*. The film acts as a reflection on incompetence, in which the first-person narrator instils a calm

confidence before the illusion is shattered and the abhorrence revealed for comedic effect; utilising the error as a tool for disrupting our preconceptions.

In Jack's circumstance the restrictions placed on him by an injury transformed his visual language by channeling his creativity, and Illustrators' instinct, towards unfamiliar and under developed technologies. Draconian measures, such as instigating physical injury, are unwelcome but this drastic and harrowing tale does illustrate the necessity for students of illustration to look beyond predictable and familiar means of production.

## Conclusion

Through the material gathered for this paper it is clear that the mythical *eureka* moment is really the product of a consistently curious and meandering mind-set; a plunge into the absurd not obviously aligned to the capitalist imperative. Illustrator's seemingly childlike or *mad* behaviour could be easily dismissed but is in fact necessary to develop artwork that transcends, rather than imitates, current popular tastes. As Lindauer (2017, p.69) observes "*purely client orientated design unfortunately does not lead to really major discoveries*", rather it is the accident, and its recognition, that feed and invigorate the in-demand Illustrator's alchemic imagination.

Ben Newman's "*spaghetti*" motif demonstrates that big ideas don't fall from the sky onto your laptop, they are the process of determination and curiosity in the face of the inevitable "*break in flow*" (Menkman, 2011, p.8) an accident constitutes. So, a direct ascension to success is unrealistic, rather Illustration is a frequently turbulent but astonishingly rewarding academic pursuit, Sachs (2016) advising; "*not to be hung up if you don't know exactly what you want to make. I think it's healthy not to have performed ideas of exactly what you'll do when you leave art school*".

Haughton's encouragement for students to "*avoid rigid practice and build an acceptance of accidents*" rekindles a passion for exploration and experimentation also characterized within the immediacy of D.I.Y. punk doctrine. If creative agility is to remain the touchstone for economic growth, in light Davos reverberations, then students of Illustration are encouraged to *kick out the jams* and adopt a similarly reckless approach to the future, that reflects the cataclysmic political and technological events dictating rapid change across the world.

Sometimes it's difficult for students to acknowledge that seemingly insignificant, unintended outcomes are better than the lovingly crafted objective they had imagined. However, this paper surmises the recognition, capture and absorption of such unstable material remains integral to creative success. Virilio (2005, p.85) reminds us "*we never advance except through catastrophe*" and just as in Carle's infamous fable the art school environment must encourage tangents, blind alleys and conspicuous catastrophes to befall, in order to metamorphose and emerge.



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