

Research Paper

Creative Employment in a Gig Economy

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Abstract

This paper explores the changes to employment in society, and artists specifically through the development of what is now sometimes called the 'gig economy'. How this new phenomenon affects art graduates seeking employment in today's climate is investigated and the creation of a portfolio is examined as a possible solution to these challenges. Themes and ideas from business journalist Christopher Niesche, employment law specialist Max Whitehead and, author and literary critic William Deresiewicz are examined and will be compared with the experiences of illustrator Jean Jullien, graphic designer Paula Scher and portfolio specialist Fig Taylor. Throughout the paper, "Portfolio 2018" is examined as the authors response to the obstacles to gaining employment in the gig economy; the decisions made concerning criticality and content are also explored and compared with the experiences of Jullien, Scher and Taylor; and how their expertise has influenced and contextualised the final work.

Introduction

In a society with a strong emphasis on economic-self-responsibility, it could be said that being employed in the creative industries is one of the greatest challenges facing arts graduates today. Society and how we are employed has changed drastically from when creatives were simply craftspeople,¹ and even when they became solitary geniuses, their approach to employment was wildly different from today. What tools can be used to help art graduates gain employment in their chosen field? How can these tools be best applied to specifically present design and illustration skills into a workforce that seemingly has a self-employed bias? This paper looks at how a portfolio can be a solution to these questions, how and why the idea of a 'gig economy' has been used to describe society today, and how this, combined with experiences of creatives working in the industry today, has informed the authors work "Portfolio 2018".

The Gig Economy

The term 'gig economy' was first used in 2009 at the height of the financial crisis in America.² It refers to unemployed individuals 'gigging'³, meaning working several part-time jobs whenever they can find employment. However, the earliest usage of the term 'gig work' (which is short for engagement) was actually referring to jazz musicians in the 1920's, where they would get short term work playing music at a venue before moving on to the next location.⁴ Business journalist Christopher Niesche, believes the trend towards a gig economy is driven by the desire to achieve the "*holy grail*" of work-life balance, by changing from the

¹ Deresiewicz, William. 2015. "The Death of the Artist - and the Birth of the Creative Entrepreneur." *The Atlantic*. Feb. Accessed 07 28, 2017. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/the-death-of-the-artist-and-the-birth-of-the-creative-entrepreneur/383497/>.

² Hook, Leslie. 2015. "Year in a word: Gig economy." *Financial Times*. 30 12. Accessed 09 25, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/b5a2b122-a41b-11e5-8218-6b8ff73aae15>.

³ IBID

⁴ IBID

traditional five day, nine to five working life to something more flexible.⁵ But, are creatives achieving the desired flexibility that the gig economy promises? Niesche is not convinced.

*"...it is sometimes questionable to what extent workers get the flexibility they want. They can find themselves working through the night or on weekends on an urgent project because they know if they refuse it, the client will go elsewhere and cut them off from work."*⁶ Niesche

This is an interesting point and questions the idea or the utopic notion of freedom that we are sold. Are we sacrificing financial stability for artistic freedom? Questions such as this appear to suggest that ideas surrounding the gig economy function as a façade created by optimists making the best of a changing economy. Nonetheless, there are those who prosper within this environment. For example, Paula Scher, whose role as a partner in a large design firm, has formulated a flexible work structure, that many designers

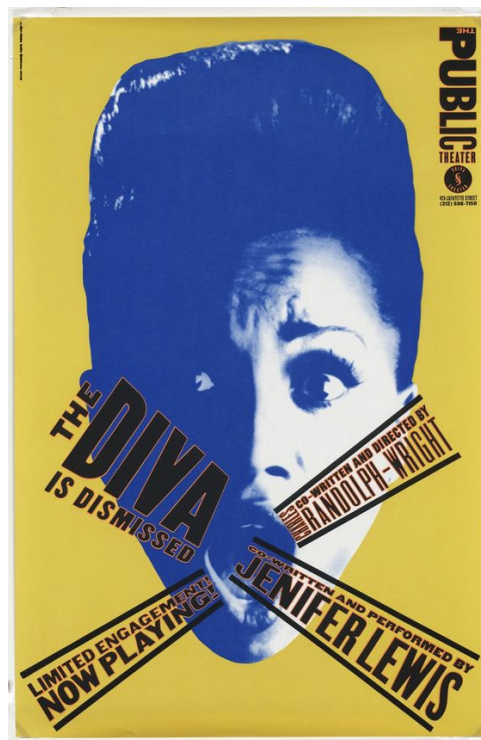


Figure 1: "The Diva is Dismissed", Poster for The Public Theatre identity and branding campaign, by Paula Scher, 1994.

⁵ Niesche, Christopher. 2017. "Christopher Niesche: The rise of the gig economy." *NZ Herald*. 05 02. Accessed 07 25, 2018. https://www.nzherald.co.nz/personal-finance/news/article.cfm?c_id=12&objectid=11795137.

⁶ IBID

try to attain by being self-employed. She has achieved a work-life balance and makes her situation work for her.

*"I balance three major things: getting business, doing business, and educating... I get to work around 9:30am and usually go home around 7pm... I'm generally in New York (at work) four days a week and in the country (at home) for three... For me, I have to have change and stability. They seem like opposites, but they're really not: the stability is knowing that I have familiar places, and the change is mixing up what's going on in those places."*⁷ Scher

The question is where has this change to our economy come from, why has it developed, specifically in the arts, and how has this created the climate that creatives operate in today. Author and literary critic, William Deresiewicz links how the audience and changing method of earning a living from art, has been the driving force behind this. Creatives originally served apprenticeships like other craftsmen, creativity was prized, but credibility and value resulted from tradition.⁸ Artists were grouped in the middle or lower middle social classes⁹, below merchants. But this started to change in the late 18th century, as part of the Romanticism^{10, 11}. Where individualism and originality combined with rebellion and youth, led people to break with tradition and make their own way¹². Arts became a new creed where people pursued higher truths and artists became solitary geniuses.¹³ By the modernist movement¹⁴, a century later, the artist was at the pinnacle of their status.¹⁵ This idea of artists being a creative genius in their own world appears to have fixated the public's imagination as somewhat of a fairy tale, where in reality, being a fine artist in today's society is generally not a full time employment option, in fact, rather a part time pursuit at best, supplemented by a 'real job'.

⁷ Essmaker, Ryan & Tina. 2013. "Paula Scher on The Great Discontent." *The Great Discontent*. 19 11. Accessed 10 19, 2018. <http://thegreatdiscontent.com/interview/paula-scher>.

⁸ Deresiewicz, William. 2015. "The Death of the Artist - and the Birth of the Creative Entrepreneur."

⁹ In developed nations across the world, the lower-middle class is a sub-division of the middle class that refers to households and individuals who are somewhat educated and usually stably employed, but who have not attained the education, occupational prestige, or income of the upper-middle class.

¹⁰ A movement in the arts and literature which originated in the late 18th century, emphasizing inspiration, subjectivity, and the primacy of the individual.

¹¹ Deresiewicz, William. 2015. "The Death of the Artist - and the Birth of the Creative Entrepreneur."

¹² IBID

¹³ IBID

¹⁴ From the late 19th to the mid-20th century, particularly in the years following World War I.

¹⁵ Deresiewicz, William. 2015. "The Death of the Artist - and the Birth of the Creative Entrepreneur."

After WWII art became institutionalised, an entire bureaucratic system evolved, which inevitably transformed the artist from a genius to a professional.¹⁶ The air of mystery and the sense of a divine calling disappeared¹⁷, replaced with educated professionals who worked hard, and could prove their work was a collection of legitimate art built on, over years of hard toil.

*“The genius became the professional. Now you didn’t go off to Paris and hole up in a garret to produce your masterpiece... and wait for the world to catch up with you. Like a doctor or lawyer, you went to graduate school.”*¹⁸ Deresiewicz

All of which leads us to today where the impression is that society is changing from working for big corporations your entire working life; 40-50 hours per week, focused on the next promotion; to flexible working hours and freelance/consultancy work for a range of clients, working remotely and having a range of skills. As Max Whitehead, an employment law specialist explains, we are a nation of contractors, and a large proportion of employees are now preferring to be part time.¹⁹

*“...baby boomers want to top up their pension Gen Z like work life balance, high powered work for high pay and less time at work.... Millennials want flexibility, they don’t want to be committed to one business...”*²⁰ Whitehead

While it seems to be affecting the workforce generally, it appears to be particularly prevalent in the creative industries. Where the changes are being driven by employers as well as employees, companies have the ability to pick and choose their creatives based on specific required skills for individual projects²¹, rather than simply having a full-time creative department. In portfolio specialist Fig Taylor’s opinion, the industry is changing, and multi-talented creatives are becoming more desirable, in an interview with creative director Doug Powell, he says *“I think most young designers can improve their marketability by*

¹⁶ Deresiewicz, William. 2015. “The Death of the Artist - and the Birth of the Creative Entrepreneur.”.

¹⁷ IBID

¹⁸ IBID

¹⁹ Whitehead, Max, interview by Karyn Hay. 2018. “Getting to grips with the ‘Gig Economy’.” *Lately with Karyn Hay 18 October 2018*. RNZ. 18 10. Accessed 10 23, 2018. https://www.radionz.co.nz/audio/player?audio_id=2018667467.

²⁰ IBID

²¹ Taylor, Fig. 2012. *How to Create a Portfolio and Get Hired: A guide for Graphic Designers and Illustrators*. Second Edition. London, UK: Laurence King Publishing Ltd. Page 22.

having a broad set of skills – assuming it is not watered down.”²² Paula Scher also shares this opinion, “I believe most good designers are generalists, which means they can solve any problem.”²³ Designers today perhaps don’t need to be specialists in one area, in fact this may not be desirable at all, having a range of skills and the ability to problem solve and think creatively appears, now, to be as important as your design skills.

Working on a freelance basis, instead of working for one company full time, is a popular, and often necessary career path for many young creatives entering the workforce, and this often starts while still studying. French illustrator Jean Jullien studied graphic design but started working on commercial projects while he was still a student, which meant he moved into freelance self-employment quite naturally when he graduated.

“...never really felt like I had to intentionally start a freelance design career – I just continued sharing my work and accepting jobs along the way. I worked on professional projects with clients and kept schoolwork as a playground for my creative experimentation.”²⁴ Jullien



Figure 2: "Checkout", Giclee Print from Allo show at Kemistry Gallery, by Jean Jullien, 50x70cm, 2013.

²² Taylor, Fig. 2012. How to Create a Portfolio and Get Hired: A guide for Graphic Designers and Illustrators. Page 22.

²³ Scher, Paula. 1992. *The Graphic Design Portfolio: How to Make a Good One*. New York: Watson-Guipill Publications. Page 12.

²⁴ Heneveld, Tammi. 2016. "Jean Jullien." *The Great Discontent*. 09 08. Accessed 04 04, 2018.
<https://thegreatdiscontent.com/interview/jean-jullien>.

This approach is also one that has been taken with “Portfolio 2018”, which is comprised of a mix of professional and personal projects. This has allowed the author to both explore and experiment with illustration, but also to gain real-world experience working with clients, expanding her graphic design experience and expertise, and further developing her ability to problem solve and think creatively.



Figure 3: "Best of Jazz Poster", by Paula Scher, 1979.

In contrast to the author, Jullien and other graduates entering the workforce today, Scher has worked as part of a company for most of her career. In 1970²⁵ she started her career as a graphic designer; when it was the norm to get work in a creative department in a large company and specialise; she started by designing the inside of children's books, and then moved to designing record covers at CBS.²⁶ Now, as a partner at Pentagram²⁷, she finds that she works best as part of team rather than on her own as a freelancer.

"My partners at Pentagram stimulate and inspire me; I compete with them, and I like the intellectual stimulation. I was president of an organization called Alliance Graphic International for

²⁵ Essmaker, Ryan & Tina. 2013. "Paula Scher on The Great Discontent."

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²⁷ Pentagram is the world's largest independently-owned design studio.

the past three years, and I have friends all over the world who are terrific designers. I've learned a lot from them and they make my work better."²⁸ Scher

However, when entering the workforce in the creative industries today, in the gig economy, how do these issues influence career choices and how graduates present their skills to maximise their appeal to potential employers? Whether this would be an inhouse designer for a company, a junior designer at a creative agency or indeed a freelancer with multiple clients, what strategies are likely to be effective in taking the step from student to professional?



Figure 4: "PETIT APPÉTIT" by Jean Jullien, Giclee Print, A1.

Jullien, successfully navigated this transition by starting to do commercial work whilst still studying and then sharing his work online, capitalizing on the burgeoning blog culture that is thriving today.

"I actually started when I was still in school. In those days, it was the beginning of the blog culture, so I began posting work I was making at school on MySpace. Soon after, a blog called Manystuff found

²⁸ Essmaker, Ryan & Tina. 2013. "Paula Scher on The Great Discontent."

my blog and did an article on it. That started the snowball effect that characterizes blogging and social media today: as more people shared it, I started to get commissions.”²⁹ Jullien

An online presence is seemingly expected in today’s gig economy where creatives appear to promote themselves, not just to employers, but to the public, for freelance work. Developing an online following is often synonymous with being offered regular work. People think nothing of tracking down the creative behind a ‘liked’ image online to license the work for another application. The author has experienced this phenomenon when Stroke Foundation NZ³⁰ found her “Kowhai” fabric design in a google search, then traced it to her Spoonflower.com³¹ shop, where they found her contact details on her website. They licensed the design from her to use in their Christmas campaign mailout (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Stroke Foundation Christmas campaign mailout documents, 2017, photo by Penny Royal

²⁹ Heneveld, Tammi. 2016. “Jean Jullien.”

³⁰ The Stroke Foundation is a New Zealand charitable national organisation that supports stroke survivors, and their families and friends.

³¹ Spoonflower.com is an American based website that sells custom printed fabrics, wallpaper and giftwrap. Designers can upload their designs and sell them for a commission.

The Portfolio

“To a design student... a portfolio essentially consists of its contents: a representational body of work that the student will bring when knocking on doors of potential employers in the hopes of obtaining professional work.”³² Scher

The student hopes that this magical document will make them irresistible to employers and clients, and if done correctly, will solve immediate employment concerns. But what comprises a successful portfolio and how does this dovetail with personal branding and the use of social media?

Taylor advises when putting together a portfolio, that it is *“generally agreed you should start with your strongest piece and end on a similarly high note”³³*. Having the ability to assess your own work unemotionally is essential and a vital skill to demonstrate to potential employers. By carefully selecting your strongest work to make sure the first piece featured sets the tone is an essential part of creating a portfolio.



Figure 6: 'Inspirational NZ Women' illustrated portrait series by Penny Royal, black pen and watercolour on paper, 210mm x 297mm, 29/06/2018

In “Portfolio 2018”, the author has carefully thought about which projects best reflect her as a creative, as well as which work she is most proud of. This has influenced not only the work that has been included in her

³² Scher, Paula. 1992. *The Graphic Design Portfolio: How to Make a Good One*. Page 12.

³³ Taylor, Fig. 2012. *How to Create a Portfolio and Get Hired: A guide for Graphic Designers and Illustrators*. Page 99.

digital portfolio, but also which three projects to feature in the exhibition. Whilst her “Inspirational NZ Women” series (Figure 6) was one of her strongest works, when placed with the other featured works it became a distraction, somehow undeservedly diminishing the other design-based projects. The author is presenting herself as primarily a designer, so it made sense for her three strongest design projects to be featured (including Figure 7).

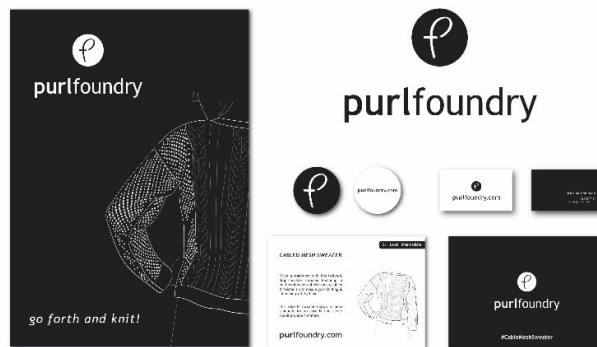


Figure 7: Purl Foundry brand concept layout for exhibition, Penny Royal, digital illustration, October 2018

When studying, Taylor says that it can be confusing trying to take onboard, the often contradicting feedback from tutors and peers; students often “*emerge from art college confused and unsure of themselves*”³⁴. What is important is to include work that you are proud of and believe in, as you will be the one ‘selling it’ to potential employers. While it would be the height of arrogance to disregard all feedback and advice, there comes a point in the development of a creative when they must find their own voice and have the confidence to back their own artistic views.

*“Many design students take freelance design jobs while in school... unfortunately, these freelance jobs often entail poor design standards, forcing the student to produce subpar work. A student in this situation should... explain the circumstances of the job. Any reasonable, intelligent employer will readily understand ... and will be more interested in the fact the student has some real-world experience.”*³⁵ Scher

³⁴ Taylor, Fig. 2012. *How to Create a Portfolio and Get Hired: A guide for Graphic Designers and Illustrators*. Page 99.

³⁵ Scher, Paula. 1992. *The Graphic Design Portfolio: How to Make a Good One*. Page 13.



Figure 8: Poster for *The Story Inside My Head* exhibition, by Penny Royal, poster, A3, 13/09/2018

This has been an issue with “Portfolio 2018”. Several freelance projects for clients (‘Muddy Britches’, ‘The No Project’) were completed in 2018 and were only included in the digital version to show some real-world experience. However, due to design choices and restrictions made by the client, the final output was not what was originally desired, and therefore these were not included as the featured projects on the wall in the exhibition. In contrast to this, the client for ‘The Story Inside My Head’ (Figure 8) allowed the author full artistic freedom, and the final design reflects this. The author was able to experiment with quirky layout options (i.e. the hands in Figure 9) and design elements (i.e the curved grey line in Figure 8) to solve



Figure 9: Page layout for *'The Story Inside My Head' Catalogue*, Penny Royal, September 2018, 210 x 150mm

difficulties. Often a design is 'watered down' with edits by the client and loses some of the initial 'magic' that the designer intended, with this project the opposite happened, the client encouraged the creative solutions to the design problems.

William Deresiewicz also discusses the conflict many artists in today's economy feel, where they will *"inevitably spend a lot more time looking over their shoulder, trying to figure out what the customer wants rather than what they themselves are seeking to say"*³⁶. Is this a sign of the death of true artistic freedom, or merely a sign that creatives have indeed become business people driven by customer demand and have actually just successfully adapted to today's gig economy?

Jean Jullien, believes *"if you become too influenced by others or worried if people will accept your style, you might not seem confident, and I don't think anyone wants to hire someone who isn't confident in their own work."*³⁷ While he was influenced by other designers, Jullien developed his own style through practice and experimentation. In the highly competitive world of illustration, Jullien has found that having a point of difference is much more important than trying to follow trends of what is popular at the moment, his success was a direct result of trying something different and being unique. Jullien however, also credits doing a balance of commercial work and personal work as key to his success.

*"I was consistent with creating and sharing my work. I wanted to keep doing commercial projects to earn a living, but I also made sure to try different things within my personal practice and collaborate with others. Through showing diversity in what I could offer, I think that encouraged diversity in what I was being offered to do... if you only do commercial work, then the extent of what you have to offer could become a bit limited"*³⁸ Jullien

³⁶ Deresiewicz, William. 2015. "The Death of the Artist - and the Birth of the Creative Entrepreneur."

³⁷ Heneveld, Tammi. 2016. "Jean Jullien."

³⁸ IBID

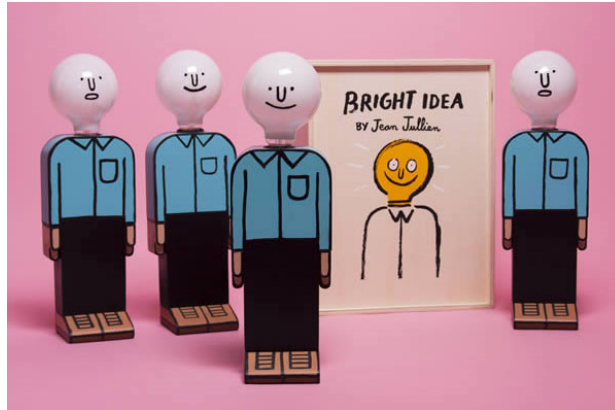


Figure 10: "Bright Idea", Collaboration between Jean Jullien & Case Study, hand painted wooden lamp, 2016.

This thinking would suggest that a portfolio should also show a range, a mix of commercial and personal projects, showing the diversity that the creative is capable of and indicating their strengths and interests. It also indicates a level of criticality in deciding which projects comprise the portfolio. In "Portfolio 2018" the featured projects for the exhibition have been carefully selected to not only show a range of skills and the intertwined elements of design and illustration, but also with consideration of how those three projects sit together.

Initially, the illustration based personal project "Inspirational NZ Women" (Figure 6), was going to be a featured project in the final exhibition, but on reflection the decision was made that it distracted from the other projects and by removing it, "Portfolio 2018" became a cohesive whole.



Figure 11: Penny Royal self-branding business cards, Penny Royal, digital illustration, October 2018

Creating a portfolio is also inevitably linked with how a creative represents themselves to the world, their personal branding. For Penny Royal in “Portfolio 2018”, the solution to this proved to be not distilling who she is down to a single colour or illustration, but creating a series of business cards (Figure 11) featuring different illustrations and colours, that while beautiful singularly, when placed together in a stack, they are a colourful, diverse, beautiful whole. Her logo became a simple hand-written version of her name, simple, no embellishment. This true and honest representation of self was something she felt far more comfortable with.

The three featured projects (Figure 7, Figure 8, Figure 12) are all graphic design based, with an illustrative influenced graphic element, thus becoming a cohesive style. While each work has a distinct aesthetic, they are all branding grounded, with logo design, brand identity and promotional artwork being the central focus. The emphasis on this type of design is the author’s response to the gig economy and how she interprets the employment climate in today’s society. Influenced by other creatives like Jean Jullien and Paula Scher, “Portfolio 2018” presents her skills as a freelance graphic designer / illustrator, into the highly competitive marketplace, that is society today.

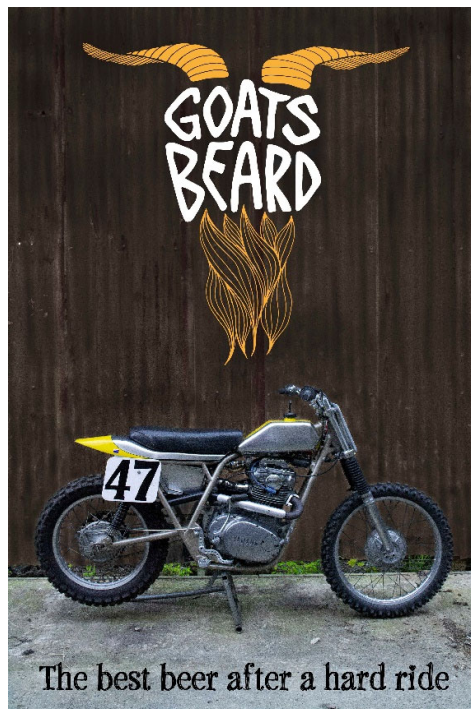


Figure 12: Goatsbeard Promotional Poster, Penny Royal, 26/08/2018, photography, digital illustration, 420 x 594mm

Conclusion

The gig economy has been driven by employees wanting greater flexibility in their careers, and this appears to be particularly prevalent in the creative industries. The career trajectory of artists has changed dramatically from the original artisans, as creatives have adapted to changing societal drivers; and this adaption often includes the very basic concern of how they will be remunerated for their work. The reality for many art graduates entering the workforce is that in order to work in their chosen field, they often have to be a self-employed freelancer, where they are required to have a very broad range of skills. One of these key skills is the ability to promote themselves, and a key promotional tool is a portfolio of their work. This is the thought process that led the author to create “Portfolio 2018” - as a means to present herself to potential employers, in the gig economy, after graduation.

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