My creative practice and personal research investigates three primary questions: How can a contemporary graphic designer's personal agency and design process develop visual communication that reflects or records the human condition? How can the contemporary study of graphic design operate with a social focus to produce engaged citizens? And, how can a contemporary graphic designer create tangible messages presented as: advocacy, activism, documentation, education, experiential frameworks, storytelling, visual narrative or visual rhetoric? The exploration of these questions simultaneously defines my pedagogical approach. These questions break down a philosophical ethos into actionable components that move from personal motivations, through investigative formal approaches, to the production of tangible results.

In exploring these questions, I have defined a singular constant—the contemporary graphic designer's personal agency. This personal agency is defined by the overlap of four components: What the designer is curious about. Why the designer is motivated to engage with specific content or problems. Whom the designer wants to collaborate and work with. And, how the designer will use visual communication methodologies to shape cultural dialogue. The contemporary graphic designer's personal agency is constant, and the relationship between these primary questions presents the variables. Or, more simply stated, this research explores how a contemporary graphic designer can engage in a process of creating visual communication that puts problem or human before outcome or artifact.

To explore the first primary question, the designer must identify the two initial components that make up the development of their personal agency: what the designer is curious about; and, why they are motivated to engage with certain content or problems. To do this, requires the acceptance of two defining premises. First, that most, if not all, visual communication is presented and consumed in broad social or cultural contexts. And, to narrow an approach to this premise, a contemporary graphic designer must define their curiosities. Identifying curiosities illuminates where their agency can be positioned in these larger social or cultural contexts. Second, visual communication that seeks to reflect or record the human condition is multi-disciplinary and cannot be defined by medium, but must be defined by motivation. When motivation is understood, a contemporary graphic designer can identify methodologies to synthesize and visualize research; can explore effective conceptual direction; can provide clear messaging and application; and can make appropriate and thoughtful innovation.

To explore the second primary question, the contemporary graphic designer must develop an investigative design process that can transfer across context and motivation. With an emphasis on process, the designer can move beyond what and why to focus on whom to collaborate and work with, or the third component in establishing designer agency. The combination of curiosity, motivation and collaboration creates an opportunity for the contemporary graphic designer to leverage relationships toward the development of metaphorical and practical meaning. Meaning derived, personally or professionally, from visual communication created to initiate and disseminate value relative to the human condition—or working with a shared intention to reveal connections within cultural and social systems—defining a more active and engaged citizen.

To explore the third primary question, a contemporary graphic designer must address the fourth component of designer agency and identify how they will use visual communication methodologies to shape cultural dialogue. A dialogue represented by tangible messages delivered as: advocacy, activism, documentation, education, experiential frameworks,

storytelling, visual narrative or visual rhetoric. To do this, the creative process must begin with humanities-centered research methodologies, such as: primary resource or literature review and analysis; content or user observation; ethnographic interviews; or archetype and persona development. The use of these research methodologies underscores context, motivation and collaboration while defining new knowledge through close investigation of the related human element.

The goal of applying these research methodologies is to uncover data that can clearly define problems; that can be visualized to observe trends or anomalies; that can be compared to develop insight; and that can be translated into objective parameters that guide formal solutions. Formal solutions that are created by the intentional combination of verbal and non-verbal elements. These verbal and non-verbal elements represent a contemporary graphic designer's raw materials. Raw materials presented as type, image, products and experiences that define conceptual meaning through their shared friction—defining and informing their role within analog, digital and experiential applications. Applications, born of a contemporary graphic designer's agency, that identify opportunities and present communication solutions that deliver appropriate human-centered results.

Ultimately, my creative practice and personal research investigates the role of the contemporary graphic designer. The contemporary graphic designer is no longer a formalist specifically focused on delivering a service rooted in industrial activity. A contemporary graphic designer is no longer solely focused on replication techniques or material knowledge. But, a contemporary graphic designer is now focused on the development of personal agency in the form of a design process that serves to interpret and present interconnected messages, spaces, mediums and contexts that inform the knowledge and interactions of humans socially and culturally.

This approach is the basis for my professional practice and pedagogical approach. It defines my designer agency and how I create visual communication—through critical making and self-initiated projects that explore meaning construction in social contexts; or, through professional collaborations that create functional experiences in the service of client missions. These activities inform the development of projects and self-assessment techniques that guide the classroom and empower students. These techniques provide students with objective tools and feedback loops to understand the growth of their individual designer agency—while simultaneously providing a mechanism to self-assess teaching effectiveness and content dissemination. These activities create space for external partnerships and projects that support the development of a holistic design process, where students define multi-disciplinary communication systems—while simultaneously providing a collaborative learning model toward understanding the problem, process and solution potential for both student and instructor. These activities allow for the identification and investigation of complex social or cultural issues that demand the use of personal agency in defining potential outcomes that mutually benefit target audiences—while simultaneously shaping a cultural dialogue to affect a collective society.

My research approach provides clarity and development in the use of communication for a contemporary practitioner with a social and cultural focus—problem or human before outcome or artifact. An approach dedicated to developing designer agency based on humanities-centered research methodologies that lead to multi-disciplinary visual communication created for and with talented collaborators, clients, organizations, colleagues and students.