UNHEARD VOICES

Serigraphic Translations of Narratives from Underpaid Workers in New Zealand

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Hello my name is David Sinfield and I am a graphic designer with over 20 years of commercial experience within the graphic design industry. I now teach graphic design / typographic design and I am a senior lecturer and programme leader at the Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand where I teach in both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

My research interests are in capturing workers stories and portraying these as visual texts in the form of very large hand printed serigraphic prints.

But before hand I would like to explain the processes behind this.

Graphic design in a commercial environment is to create and communicative texts that promote ideas or products from other people or companies.

In this role the designer is anonymous and is excluded from exercising a political or personal voice. Their communicative abilities serve the needs of their clients.

However, when a graphic designer is involved in research, especially in an academic arena, the ground shifts. Whilst I might use the same tools as a graphic designer to orchestrate these it's purpose and outcomes are very different.

This presentation is to explain how I, as a graphic designer interpret these stories into visual texts.

PHASE 1:

THE INTERVIEW

Narrative Inquiry as a methodology of capturing workers stories

I interview workers that have personal stories to tell.

In this case stories of their lives where they have worked below the minimum wage.

I use narrative inquiry as the main source of methodology and in the next slides I hope to explain the reasons behind this.
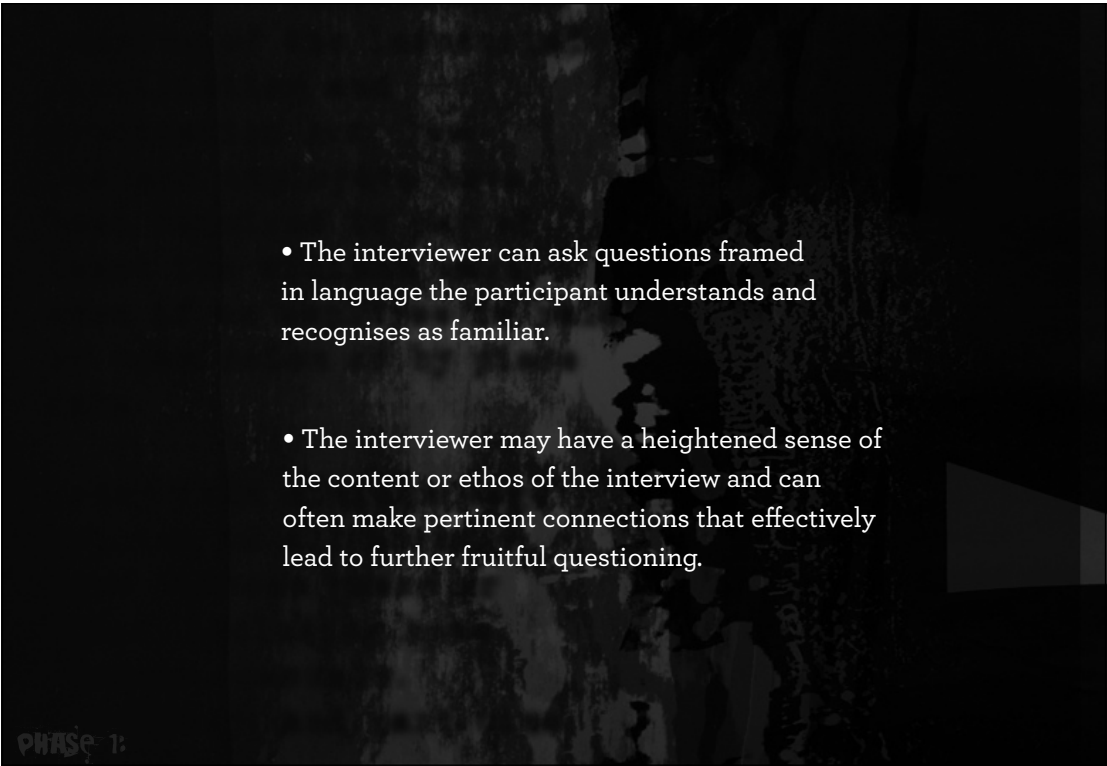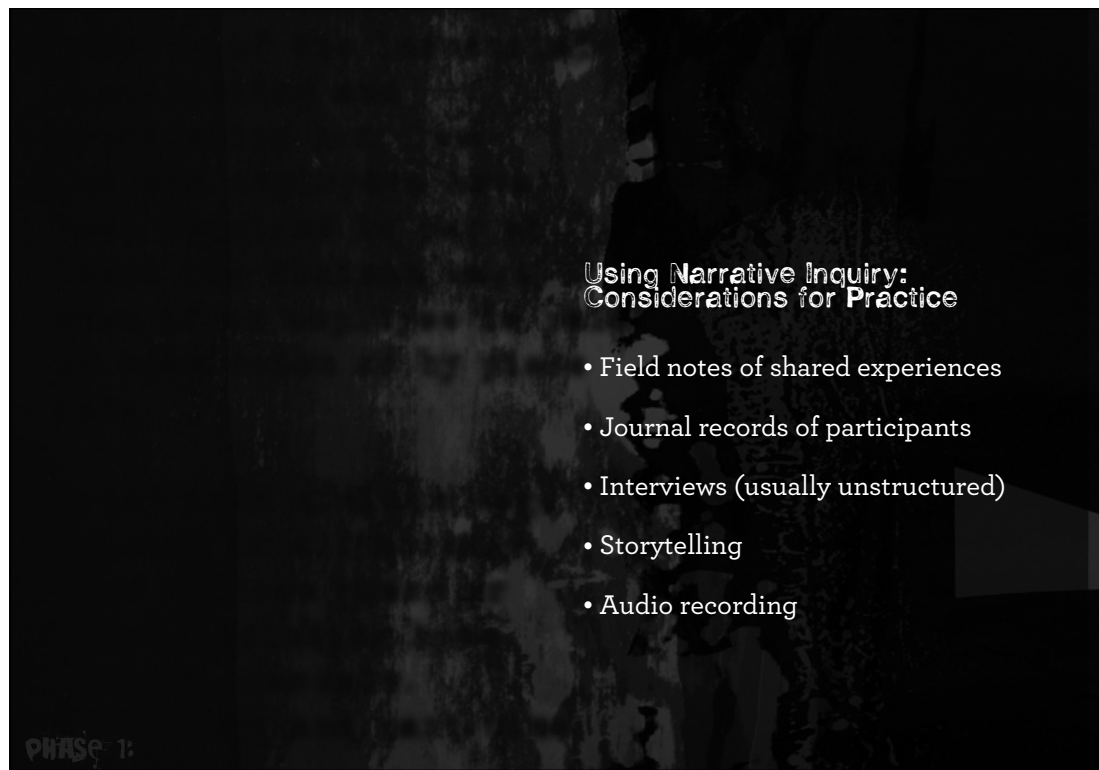
Field notes; It is important that the interviewer shares similar experiences with the participant.
For instance the participant may speak of an event that has happened to them in the past, at that
point the interviewer will interject with a similar happening. This is important as it establishes
a bond between the researcher and participant. This bond is important if the narratives are
allowed to show themselves and be truthful.

Journal records; I use a sketch pad in the interviews but, not just to write notes,
but to also sketch quick ideas that may spring from a word, sentence or the manner in which it has been spoken.

Interviews; I feel that these interviews have to be unstructured and let the story find its true path and
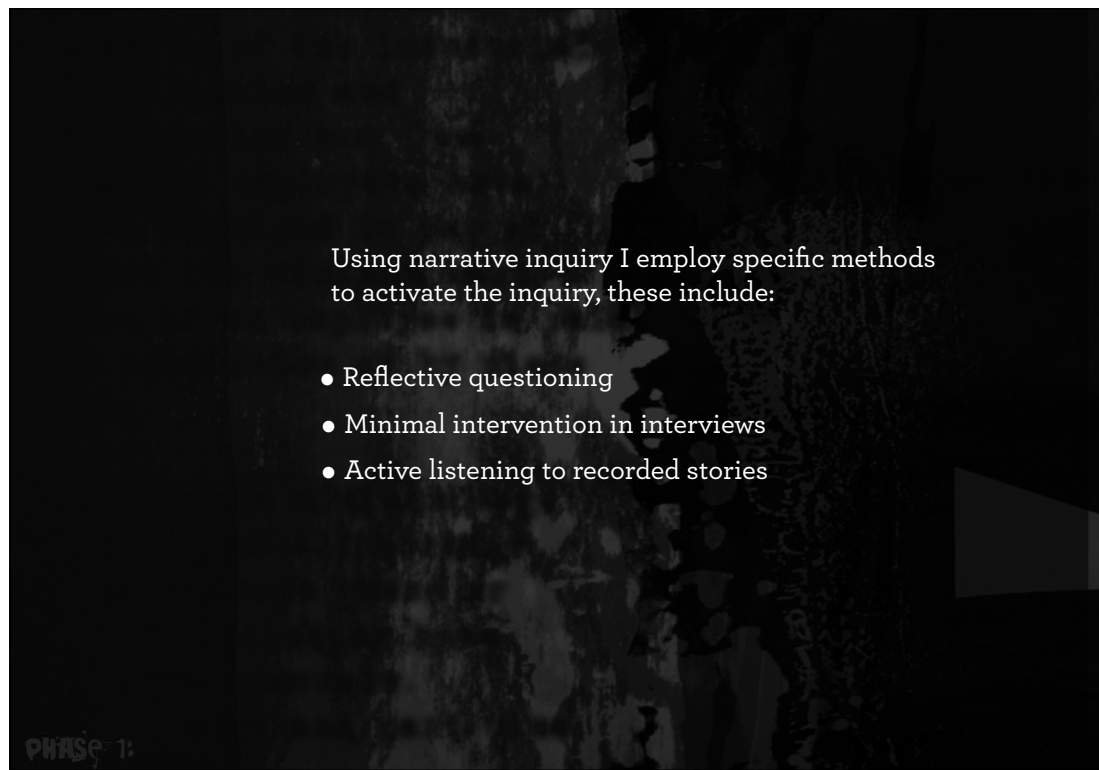not dictate to it by directing it in a certain way.

Storytelling; People like to tell stories of themselves and participate in dual story telling
where a conversation between two or more people take place.

Audio recording; I would have to say that this is the main consideration in my practice.
I set up a audio recorder and just let it run for the entirety of the interview. After the interview when
I look for inspiration in the image form I will listen many, many times but not just from to the
words but to the pauses and emphases that are used.

• The interviewer can ask questions framed in language the participant understands and recognises as familiar.

• The interviewer may have a heightened sense of the content or ethos of the interview and can often make pertinent connections that effectively lead to further fruitful questioning.

PHASE 1:

For the stories to be open and flowing it sometimes helps if the interviewer is able to demonstrate a level of empathy with the participant. This is to say for narratives to be expressed, a bond of trust between participant and interviewer is helpful especially if the interviewer has been in similar circumstances.

Using narrative inquiry I employ specific methods to activate the inquiry, these include:

- Reflective questioning
- Minimal intervention in interviews
- Active listening to recorded stories

Reflective questioning.
Responses to these questions are 'reflected back to the participant.
In the interview this approach to drawing out narrative often elicits a more deeply resonant form of narration.

Minimal intervention in interviews.
This is the process of letting them speak freely. By this I mean not interrupting them,
prompting or baiting them for answers. I would ask open ended questions from an indicative questionnaire, like:

Can you tell me how you found out about the job
or
Can you tell me why you took the job.

This would then lead on and open up to further discussion.

Active listening to recorded stories.
By listening and re-listening to the recordings I am able to assess and piece together an
understanding of the nature of the person's narrative. It is from this listening and
re-listening that I gather the inspiration to formulate the graphic narratives.

PHASE 2
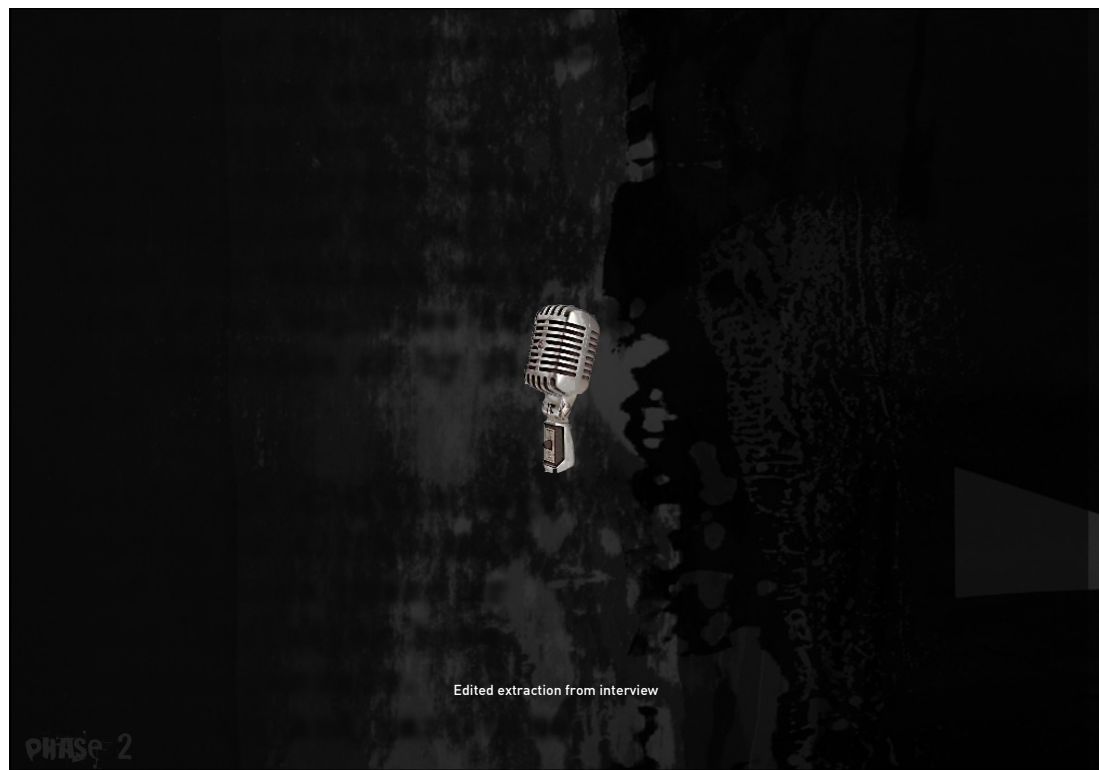Serigraphic Designs,
Synthesized Narratives
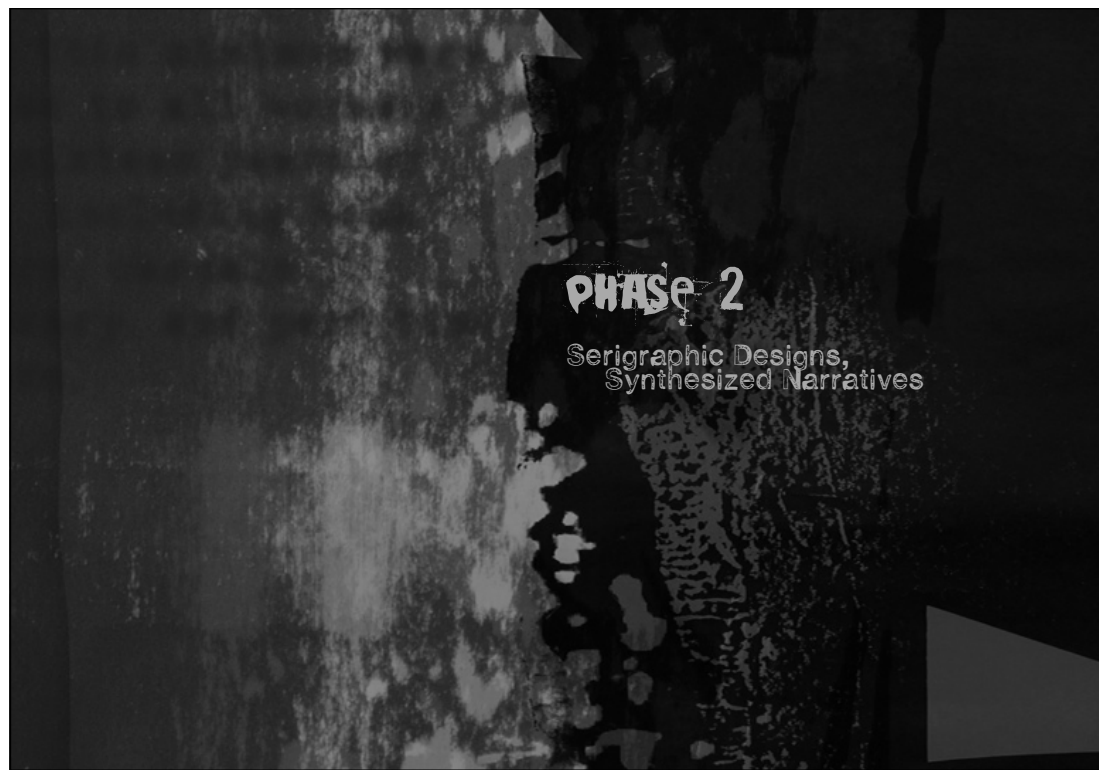
Phase 2 of this research is to listen to the interviews over and over to start to visualise the sounds and words into imagery.

The following examples of works I am about to show are from two of my participants I have interviewed
and just a fraction of the work. This is due to the time constraints at this presentation.

The following slide is an edited extraction from one of my interviews.
The original interview was over an hour and in the final edited exhibition piece this was
edited down to 6 minutes. So what you are hearing hear is just a small extract.

Please listen to the tones, pauses and emphases in the voice as well as the content.

Edited extraction from interview

PHASE 2

So what I want to show you now is how I interpret these narratives as a graphic designer and product the visual texts.

The following slides shows detail examples of the serigraphic posters with the audio extract.

Notice how I treated what is seamlessly a cute teddy bear to one of a more sinister image.

In doing so I have sought to microscopically focus-in on the printed image bringing it to an almost molecular level.
This is seen as looking beyond the surface and uncovering what lays beneath.

In print terms this is know as a half tone image and can usually only be seen by using
a magnifying glass and viewing at close level.

I have chosen to print the image twice and in contrasting colours and at differing angles and positions.

This establishes an uncomfortable feel to the poster.
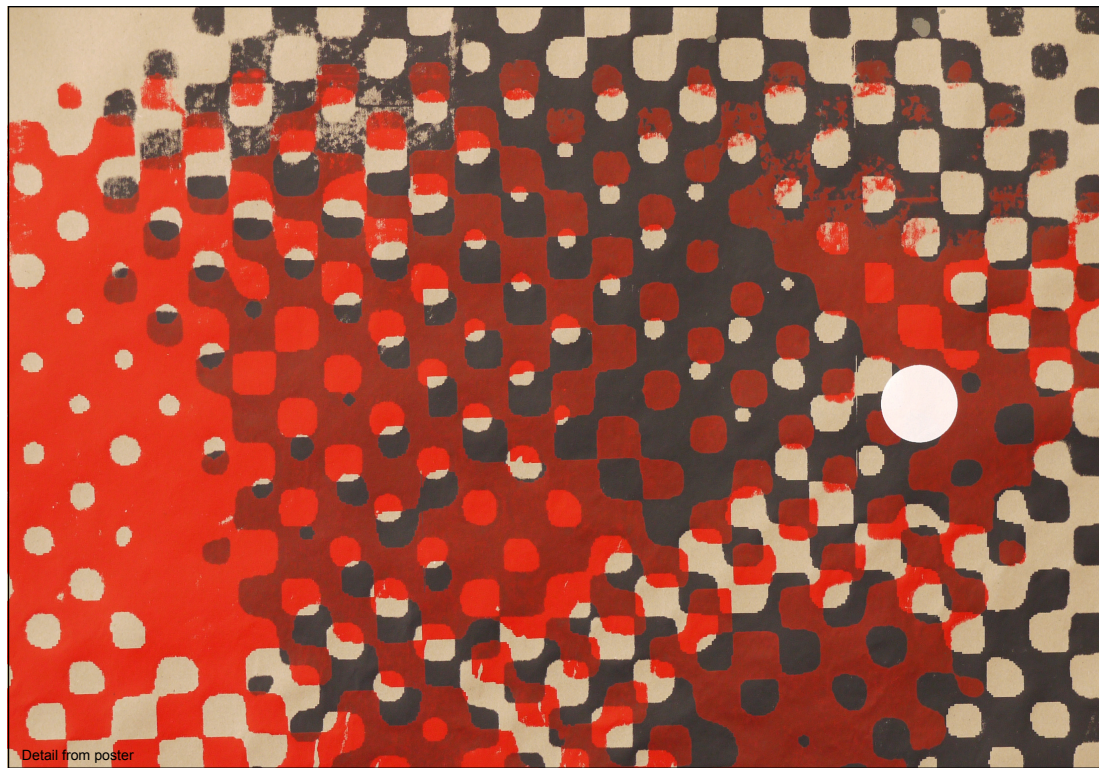
Detail from poster

Quote
"She always had headaches popping pain killers and what ever,
if I had known that; my kids would have never gone there".
End quote.

The eye of the bear is pure white, crisp and precise, this connotes the pill popping from the audio extract.

I see this sits as a divide between the children and the owner.

Detail from poster

The splattering shown here is representing the used sanitary towel that has been casually discarded on the floor.

Notice how I have chosen to smudge the text also. This is has further connotations of clutter and a disregard of order and hygiene.

In this slide the image is represented by the fact that the work was mainly manual.
Cash in hand, meaning that the tax man was unaware of this situation.

PARTICIPANT 2

Quote
"Blessed to have a job".
End quote.

For this participant's series of posters I have sought to use a typographical approach for conveying her stories.

Detail from poster

Notice how the black background colour is distressed and eroded in parts.

This represents the flacking paint of the poor environment and run down buildings where the participant grew-up and lived before traveling to NZ.

In this poster design I am showing that she is from a different country and culture.
She is from Brazil and I have reflected on this through the use of colours that are represented in their national flag.

I use textual poaching in my designs to evoke a stronger meaning.

You can see here that I have changed the symbol from the original metal bar to a stack of plates.

I have changed the wording of corrosive to the Portuguese translation.
This again further cements her personal background of her being a stranger in a foreign land.

SO WHY PRODUCE
THESE LARGE PRINTS
The serigraphic print as labour
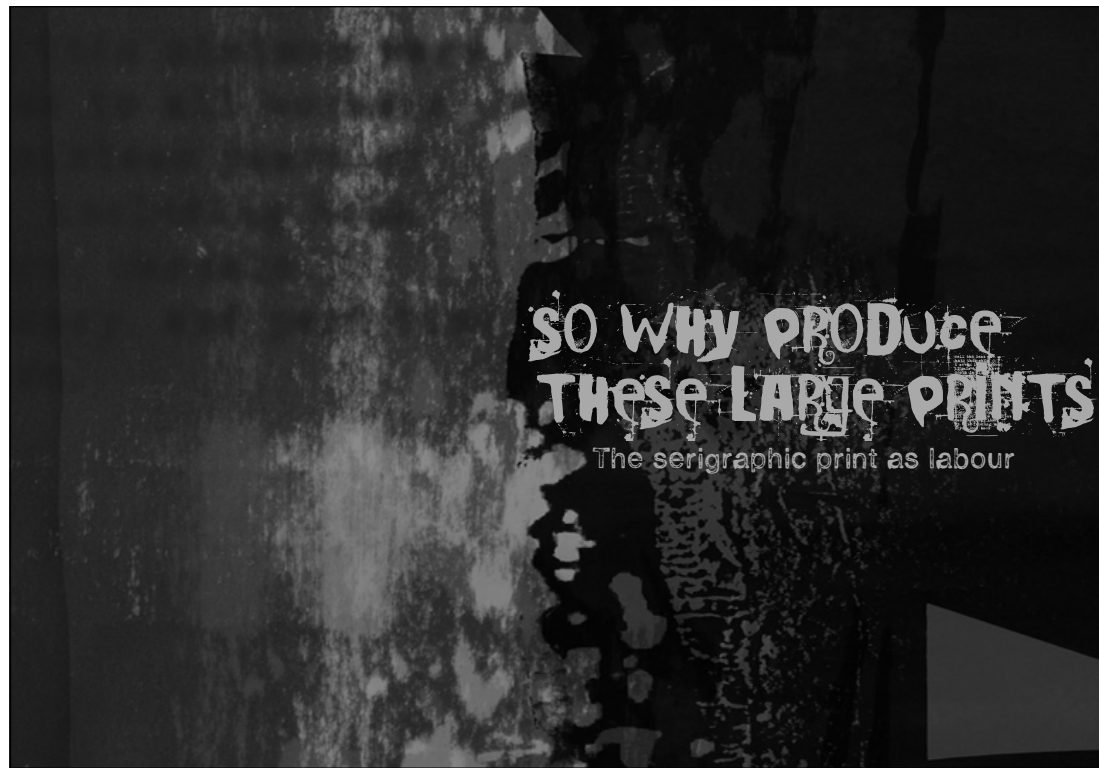
In contemporary practice a design might be polished and printed out
from a CMYK Tiff file to an inkjet printer or handed over to a print house
for multiple duplication.

However, the nature of this research sought something deeper.
I wanted work that was 'laboured over'. This challenged the process of
graphic designing that traditionally ends with the preparation of files.

Methodologically I was interested in seeing if the process of my narration
might be developed by 'labouring' over an additional stage in poster design.

This was the process of screen-printing.

Usually the contemporary graphic designer has little to no control over
how a print will turn out. However, in printing my designs I have been able to
experiment and make decisions on the final poster whilst still being in control.

These processes begin with the mixing of ink to the desired hues and tones.

In the process of printing the posters I also engage in story telling but through the development of making.

For example, the variation of pressure while hand printing can result in significant changes to the texture and depth of colour in a print.

This breathes unique life into each print and gives it its own voice despite the fact that it contains the same elements.
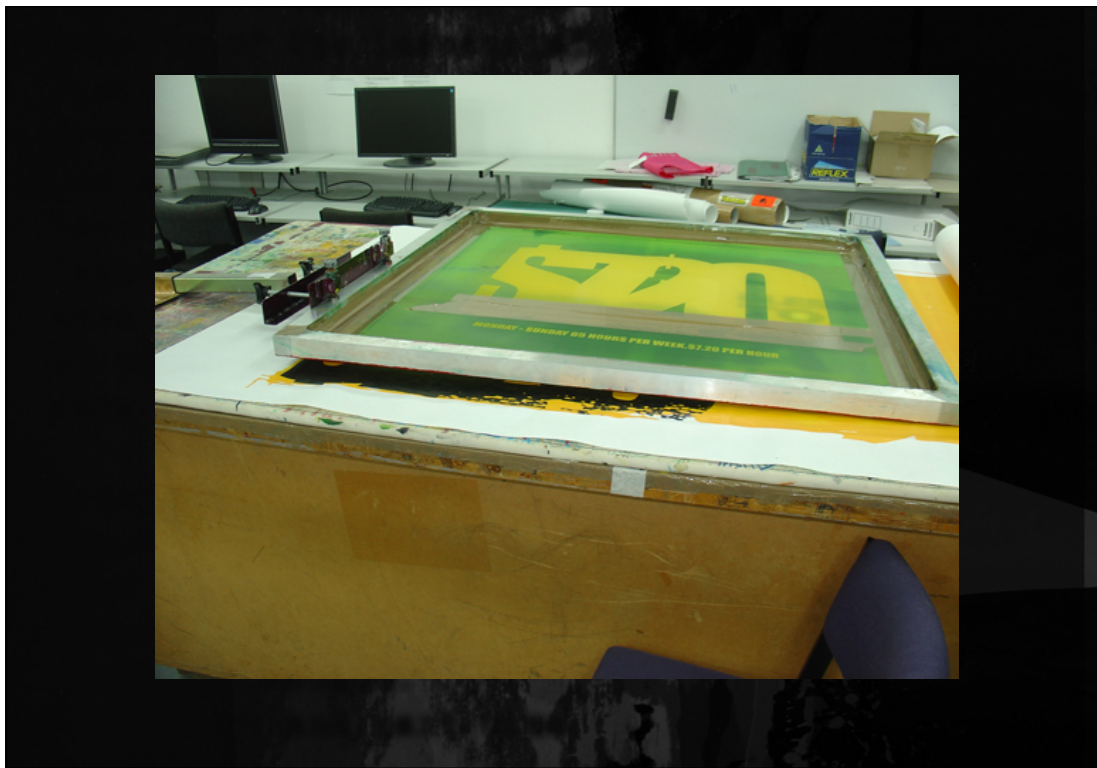
The process of printing is laborious. These images, I physically sweat over.
On average to set up multiple screens, register them, mix ink and print takes me forty hours per poster.

I had no available technology for this size or scale. I had to design and make a specialised printing jig.

This enabled me to use varying sizes of screens and to be able to accurately position these
in accordance with the requirements of the design.

What I was interested in was developing this method of image making as a way of signifying reflexivity.
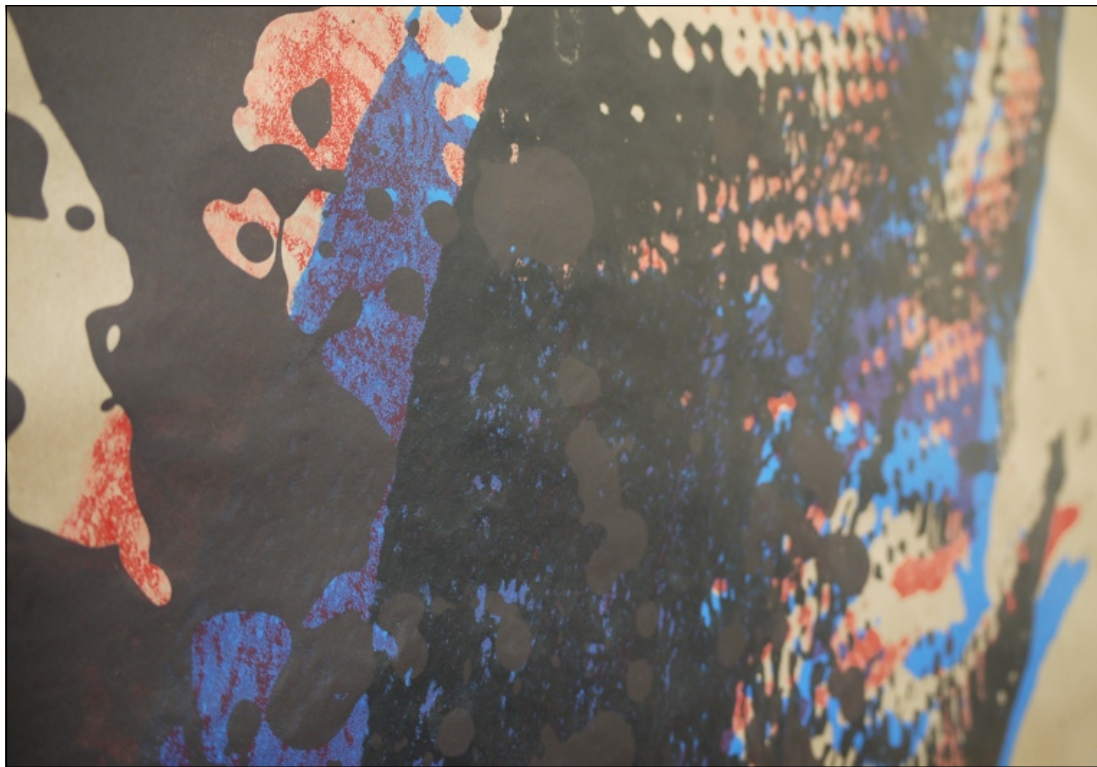
Goldman & Papson suggest that reflexivity is a method of drawing attention to the 'made' nature of a given text,
but I was interested in this going deeper.

I was interested in not only revealing references to 'making' but also to the spirit and marks of fatigue and labour.

There are areas where the ink varies in the density of its application because it is physically impossible to
pull a squeegee down such a large screen in one movement.

The prints are huge. They cannot be generated by any simple dexterity of the hand. They require the
engagement of the designer's body to effect their realisation.

Thus, by extending the narration into physical work I hoped to not only 'exercise' the visual potential of labour,
but to remind myself as a worker, of the marks of effort, inexactness and fatigue. These became elements
of the designs and through this, profiles of my story telling.

Through this process significant differences appeared between thumbnails generated on a computer and large,
gritty prints generated through a process of physical exertion.

CONCLUSION

In adopting this approach I have sought to creatively synthesize experiences into artworks that provide a deeper insight into the impact of underpaid work.

This project has not been objective; its power lies in its subjectivity and its ability to translate this across modes of story telling, from the spoken recollection to the printed artwork.

The narrative inquiry in its explication has employed methods of audio recording to elicit stories that have been prompted, where necessary, by reflective questioning.
This data has then been processed through reflection involving listening, visual response, selection, editing composing and formatting into design proposals.

David Boje suggests that narrative inquiry challenges conventional attitudes to data gathering and questions the idea of 'objective data'.

Finally these 'thumbnail' stories have been 'laboured' through a process of printing and enlargement so that in bringing my physical labour to reflections on labour, I have been able to access certain resonances and marks beyond those normally generated by the graphic designer telling visual stories inside a digital environment.

End
Thank you for listening

Any Questions

THE EXHIBITION

MP3 player
Audio recording
of workers story

This is a picture taken from the final exhibition. Notice the three stands in the centre of the room.

These were stands that housed mp3 players playing the interview.

The viewer would enter the room put the head phones on and listen to the interview whilst viewing the posters.

At this point the viewer would experience a dual narrative from the workers story and the interpretation from the designer.

You would be listening to a conversation between two people.

But there was a problem.

I notice that a large proportion of people that came into the exhibition did not put the earphones on.

This was a major set back for me as the works were only viewed and not listened to.

This meant that the viewer was only obtaining one side of the story and not fully understanding the narrative.

There was another problem that also became apparent early on.

The people that viewed these works were not the intended audience I had hoped for.

The workers that I wanted to reach with this story were not coming into the gallery.

I reflected on this. Coming from a working class background would I view these works?
In the main, working class people do not go to art galleries. It is just not in their culture.
Perhaps they feel intimidated for not knowing or being educated in this manner.

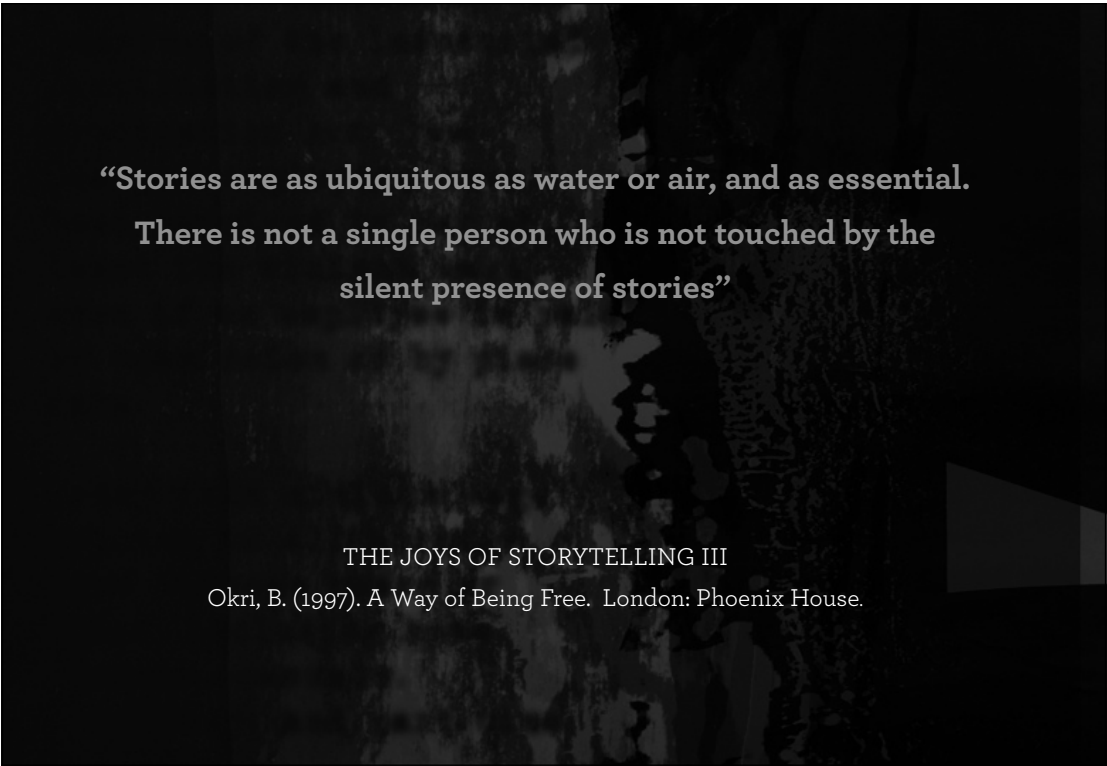 So, how can I fix this.

PHASE 2
Spatiotemporal Environments
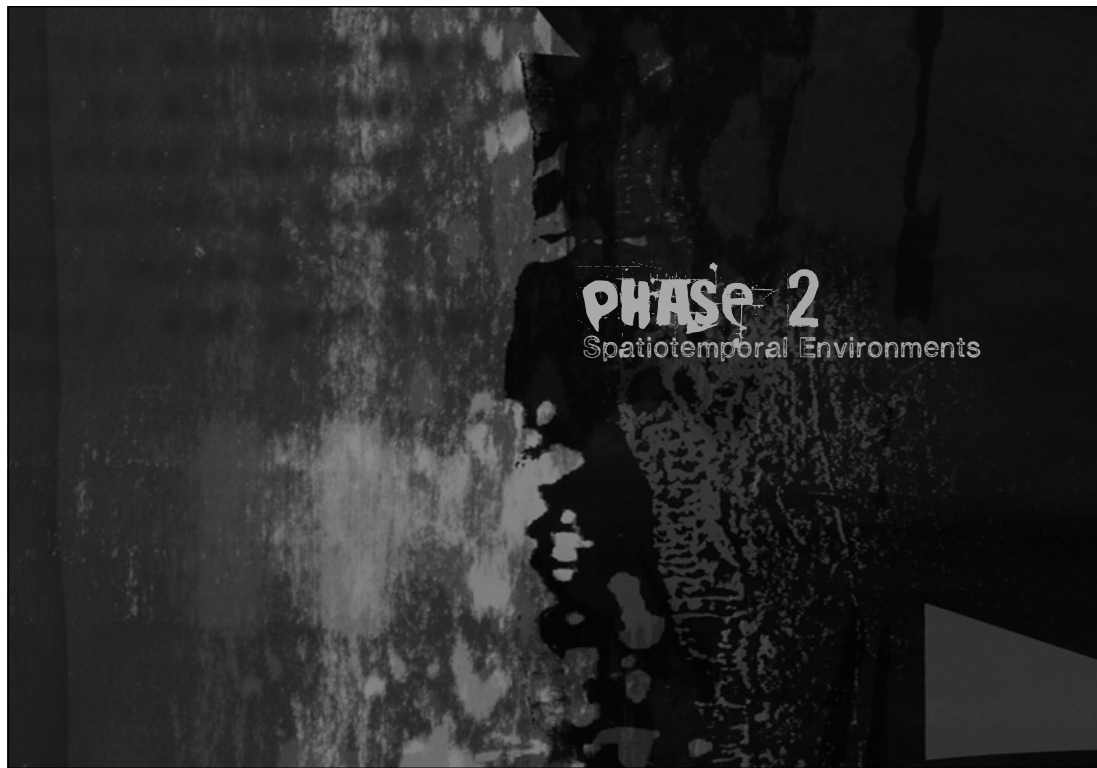
I needed to take this and put it in an environment where it would be seen and heard as originally intended.

To that end it needed to adapt and change to suit a new environment.

I am also interested in spatiotemporal environments where I have taken the audio recordings
of worker's stories and imagery and fused with typographical treatments to produce a series of short films.

The next slide shows how I will go about this.
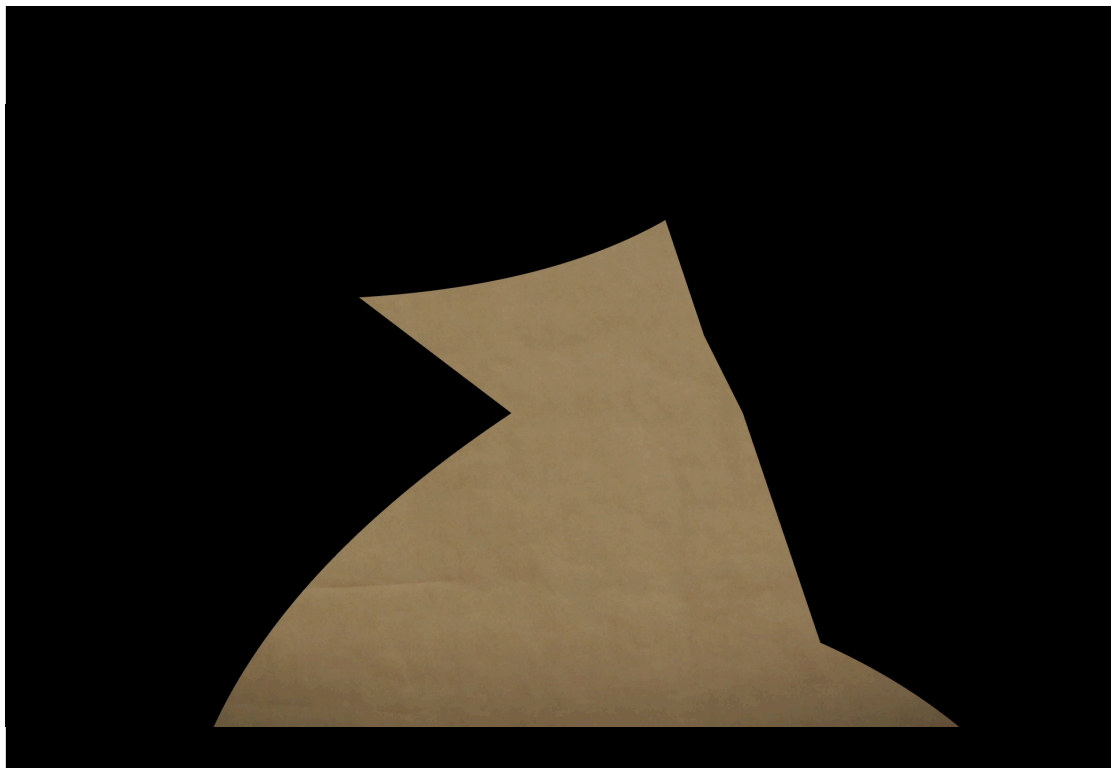
"Stories are as ubiquitous as water or air, and as essential.
There is not a single person who is not touched by the
silent presence of stories"

THE JOYS OF STORYTELLING III

Okri, B. (1997). A Way of Being Free. London: Phoenix House.

End