ASKING QUESTIONS
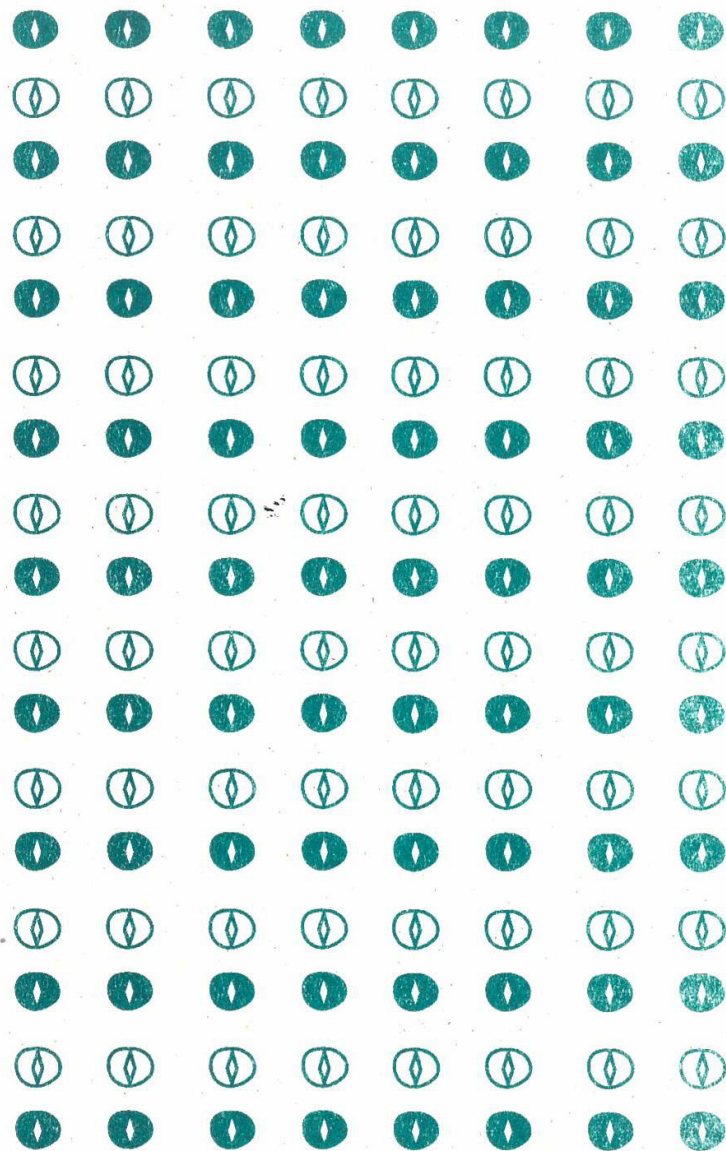
that we

CANNOT ANSWER

an opening:
the story of how
I got here

Why ask questions that we cannot answer?

To begin with, let's look at one of the
questions that lead me to this inquiry. I
wanted to understand where our ideas,
positions, realities and knowledges come
from. And so I asked: 'where does
knowledge come from?'

Obviously many philosophers, theorists
and scientists have pondered such
questions and have come to their own
positions, conclusions and
non-conclusions.

Obviously any answer to this question
I can give will be inadequate. But why
must that stop me from figuring out
a way to respond to it? What can I as
a communication designer do with
this question?

Dealing with questions of a universal yet somewhat microscopic scale: I thought to look at Central Saint Martin's limited collection of books on Physics: ranging from textbooks to philosophical discourses within the subject.

At this stage: I should acknowledge I am someone who hasn't studied Physics in over seven years. The concepts I was once familiar with are now vague. And many concepts far beyond my A-level understanding. The limitations of Central Saint Martin's collection was, in all honesty, a relief. I'm not trying to be a physicist here. But let's see what I can find.

In 'From Certainty to Uncertainty,' David Peat (2002: p. 3) makes multiple metaphorical parallels between scientific and social constructions of what we have come to agree as being 'real'. On the theory of relativity and its relationship with knowledge he says, 'the world appears different to observers moving at different speeds,' and likens this to the influence of cultural assumptions embedded within our paths of discovery.

This made me think of 'The Rani of Sirmur' by Gayatri Spivak (1985). She critiques the constructions of historical fact by revealing the Eurocentric,

patriarchal and imperialist lens within the archives she uses to trace the history of the Rani of Sirmur (ibid.). Many have later criticised her for working within the the very same limits and contexts that she is critical of - leaving her construction incomplete.

Here lies the problem I'm concerned with. What is our way out of the limits we are so embedded within?

I have also been engaging in conversations with friends, peers and other designers surrounding the western, capitalist and patriarchal hegemonic skew within the systems we occupy. I'm left wondering, if all we have created so far has come from here, what are other ways of doing and being?

'No matter how refined our experiments may be, the ultimate reality of nature can never fully be revealed.' (Peat, 2002: p. 15). While this is true, the purpose of this statement isn't to encourage staying within the comfort of our limits. Or to discourage the process of discovery.

The concept of 'Situated Knowledges,' formulated by Donna Haraway (1988) is a helpful way to frame this lack of an ability to reveal an ultimate reality. We are moving bodies, and the knowledges

we inherit as we evolve are born out of the contexts we are exposed to. It is a present marking of the boundaries of our individual limits. But beyond this it is a bid to continue expanding and evolving as new contexts and knowledges emerge. The limits aren't static. They can expand with time and effort.

So a concise ultimate answer to an impossibly large question is not really the point. But the pursuit of it, the clunky formulations of it could get us somewhere? I looked again at the scientific approach to the process of discovery. They're trying to figure out the Theory of Everything aren't they?

Scientific experiments often create simplified models - devoid of friction, resistance and the limits of scale in order to easily describe and calculate the mechanics of the complex universe we inhabit. These models are a fictional metaphor - 'they are not so concerned with reality but rather a model of reality,' (Peat, 2002: p. 105).

This provided me with an opening to help me respond to - not necessarily answer - my unanswerable questions.

I am interested in exploring the gap between reality and the smooth fictionalised models and metaphors we use to explain reality.

As I was looking through the physics textbooks in the library, many of the concepts were vague to me. But I found myself looking at the diagrams to help me make sense of the complex ideas they were describing. I was drawn to their symbolic, metaphorical qualities. And their ability to give shape to that which is difficult. They read to me as simplified fictional metaphors that represent a much more complex reality using simple shapes, planes, arrows and symbols.

A note: I was made aware of Jenny Holzer's 'Diagrams' (1977) as I shared my work with my peers, while it is not totally the same as what I am attempting here. This made me think. Is any idea original? Every path that I am going down seems to have been walked on before. But maybe somewhere down this path I will branch away and find one that is my own. But for now, I take comfort that someone else has deemed this path worthy enough to walk on.

In the following pages, I attempt to respond to somewhat existential questions - that my words couldn't

provide satisfying answers to. I respond using metaphorical diagrammatic constructions. Some questions I have responded to have made an appearance in this essay already. Some came to me as I was diagramming but didn't make it into this text.

Another note: I make a distinction between 'respond' and 'answer.' This is to acknowledge that the responses I have constructed aren't great ultimate answers to these unanswerable questions. They are just a simple attempt - a limited response. Our knowledges are bumpy, limited and filled with gaps. My thoughts on the subject are clunky. And the diagrammatic constructions that follow this text are ambiguous.

This is ambiguity is intentional. Perhaps this is an attempt at co-opting a framework of logic and system to give shape to the unanswerable, poetic, illogical or even existential.

The gap between logic and poetic; mirror the gaps that unanswerable questions provide. And when faced with gaps we feel that they, 'must be resolved' in order to make sense of, 'think or act in relation to the world,' (Pelaprat & Cole, 2011: p. 15). Thus these gaps encourage the act of imagination or the process of

resolving these "gaps" through thought, imagery and action not only for me but for anyone that engages with these questions and diagrams.

Bell Hooks (2000: p. 110) in 'Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics' says, "To be truly visionary we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality."

So now I come back to this question: what is the value in responding to questions that can't be answered?

Here, a number of unanswerable questions lead me on a journey to read, learn, think, imagine and make. And to invite those that engage with my work to encounter these gaps - and perhaps be encouraged to do the same. They provided me with an opening to construct an evolving practice, position and set of guiding principles as a communication designer and researcher.

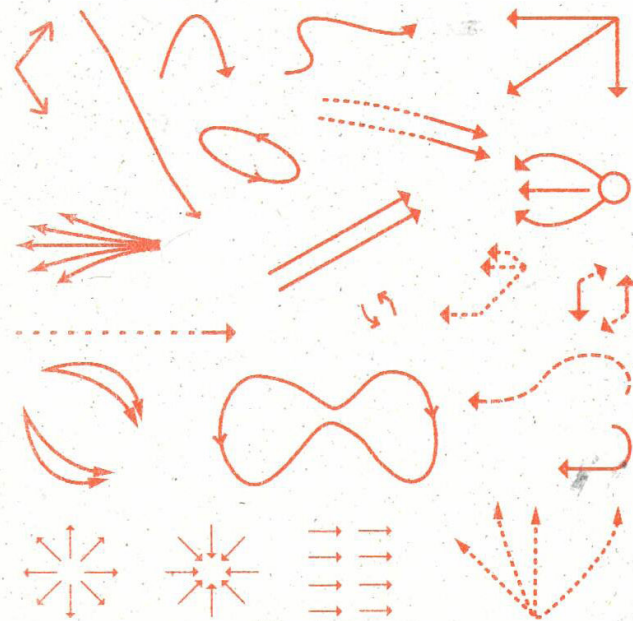*a dia [grammatic] metaphor.*

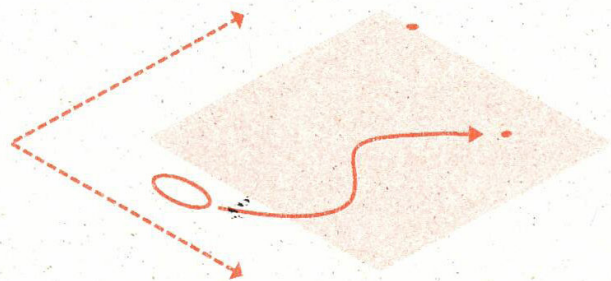The topic is subject of the metaphor.
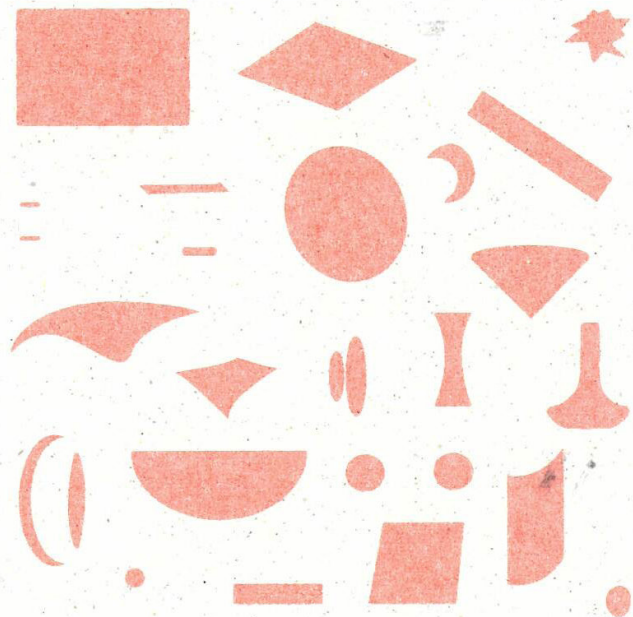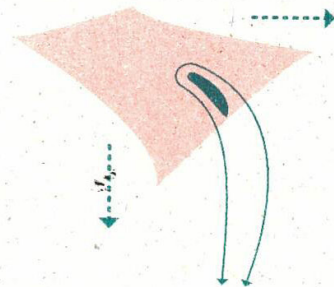
The vehicle is the term used
metaphorically.
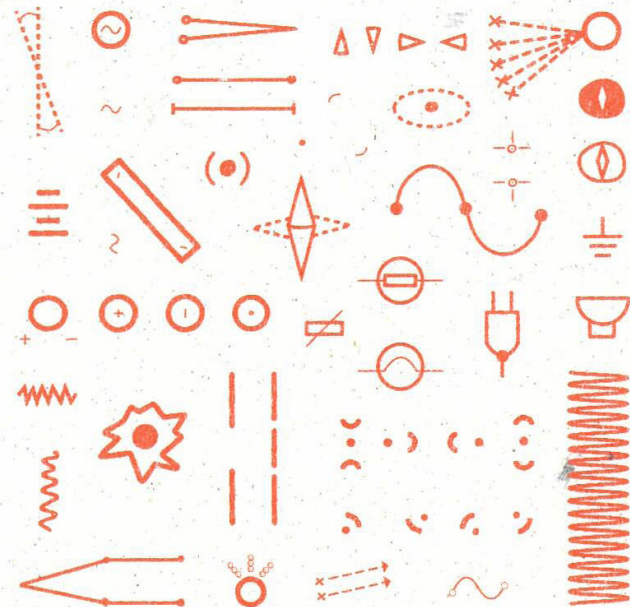
And the ground is the relationship between
the topic and the vehicle. (End, 1986)

Can something come from nothing?

Where does the forgotten go?

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