

Runxin Zheng in conversations with

Matthew Stuart

typographer, editor, writer and lecturer

Josh Lepawsky

author and professor of Geography
at Memorial University of Newfoundland

During the previous term, I examined how materials, such as aluminium, are embedded in complex systems of production, consumption, and waste.

Through my conversation with Matthew Stuart, I realised my interest lies in exploring the microcosms within systems—how materials are made, distributed, circulated, used, discarded, and, sometimes, reused. This methodology, which I initially applied to aluminium, can extend to any material. One insight that emerged is my desire to re-enact these systems through a tangible, sensory experience in the form of a physical publication. The materiality of such a publication can engage the audience’s senses—sight, touch and smell—allowing them to experience the complexities of a material like paper, not just intellectually but viscerally. This realisation has shifted my focus to paper, a material deeply embedded in graphic communication design.

Like aluminium, paper has complex underlying systems involving resource extraction, production, applications, and post-consumer life cycles. Despite its ‘green’ reputation as one of the most sustainable materials, the large-scale production and consumption of paper, especially for packaging, raise important questions. Influenced by Voss (2024), I am researching how to generate alternative ways of understanding paper through ‘sensory experience’. Could we understand this material in a new light by smelling the different scents created by various inks or feeling the texture of coated vs. uncoated paper? Could we gain insights through folding papers and exploring new ways of paper packaging?

Matthew and I also discussed the need to align my production method with the values and ethics of my research. How can I embody the system within the paper industry in the material, binding techniques, ink choices, and size of the publication? This led me to explore artists who have embedded the system they critique in the form of their work. For instance, in *FedEx Glass Works*, Beshty (2017) uses the fragility of glass boxes to document the shipping system. Scheeren (2013), whose photography book *Cut Shaving*, integrates mailer into the design of its book cover, so when readers receive Scheeren’s book, they can spot traces of the journey this book has made on its cover. In her photo series *Airports*, Brown (2019) intentionally passed rolls of film through airport X-ray scanners, capturing the liminal, ghostly, otherwise unseen frictions in the border control systems. These references remind me that the publication’s design must reflect the system it critiques.

While Matthew’s insights emphasised the production methods of my research, my conversation with Josh Lepawsky, the co-author of the book *Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power*, further advanced my enquiry by highlighting the misconceptions around discarding. We often mistake individual experiences of waste for the overall practice of discarding, while most waste is generated



The FedEx glass box gets broken when shipping from the artist to the gallery.

Beshty, W. (2017) *FedEx® Large Kraft Box*. ©2004 FEDEX 155143 REV 10/04 SSCC, International Priority, Los Angeles-Beijing trk#858510689297, September 9–22, 2011, International Priority, Beijing–Paris trk#874594464106, March 13–16, 2012. [Digital art]. Available at: <https://www.actionstakenunderthefictitiousname-waleadbeshtystudiosinc.com/fedex-glass-works-2007/zz64ygid078965xp4sg80n-n2i3q06t> (Accessed: 30 August 2024).



The book cover also functions as a mailer, highlighting the acts of opening this book like a packaged good and the consequential act of consuming it as a product.

Fw: Books (2013) *Jaap Scheeren — Jaap Scheeren Cut Shaving*. Available at: <https://fw-books.nl/product/jaap-scheeren-jaap-scheeren-cut-shaving/> (Accessed: 30 August 2024)

upstream in resource extraction and manufacturing. This has led me to explore paper production more critically: what is discarded in the process? Where does this ‘waste’ go, and who are the end-of-market users? Furthermore, the language used by the paper industry, both verbal and visual, plays a crucial role in shaping how we perceive waste and the broader system—what is hidden and what is revealed?

What is discarded in the process? Where does this ‘waste’ go, and who are the end-of-market users?

Understanding who my audience is became another focal point of my conversation with Josh. Depending on whether my work engages general readers, designers, or industry representatives, the impact and accessibility of the insights will vary. Currently, I want to make the knowledge and insights more accessible for end users, such as general readers and graphic designers, who might not typically consider the systems behind sheets of paper. Josh’s perspective has encouraged me to think about how my project can translate these complex systems into a language these groups can easily grasp and engage with.

Josh has also challenged me to think about the limitations of graphic design in creating systematic change. While design can offer new ways of experiencing and thinking about paper, this alone is not enough to shift individual behaviour or significantly impact the industry. We discuss concepts like per-unit efficiency and the rebound effect within the circular economy. Even if individuals reduce paper consumption, the industry’s growth-driven nature often offsets these gains by increasing overall production volume. However, Josh emphasised that while our power as designers and individual players is limited, history shows that change is possible. Systems that seem fixed today were once different. For instance, the public library’s lending model presents an alternative to individual ownership and consumption, providing a glimpse into how we might reimagine paper use in a society premised on growth.

Systems that seem fixed today were once different.

In summary, both Matthew’s and Josh’s insights have not only helped me refine my theoretical approach but also steered my practical steps forward.



Brown captures the ghostly frictions of the border control system by passing rolls of film through the X-ray scanner at security checks.

Brown, P. (2019) *Airports*. Polly Brown. Available at: <https://www.pollybrown.info/airports> (Accessed: 23 September 2024)

As I continue this exploration, my next steps include reaching out to paper industry representatives, such as G.F Smith, to gain deeper insights into the industry and experimenting with paper-making from scratch to engage with the material and its systems physically. My goal is to produce work that not only critiques the paper industry but also allows the reader to participate in and experience the complexities firsthand.

References

Brown, P. (2019) *Airportals*. Polly Brown. Available at: <https://www.pollybrown.info/airportals> (Accessed: 23 September 2024)

Beshty, W. (2017) *FedEx® Large Kraft Box ©2004 FEDEX 155143 REV 10/04 SSCC, International Priority, Los Angeles-Beijing trk#858510689297, September 9–22, 2011, International Priority, Beijing–Paris trk#874594464106, March 13–16, 2012*. [Digital art]. Available at: <https://www.actiontakenunderthefictitiousnamewaleadbeshystudiosinc.com/fedex-glass-works-2007/zz64ygi-do78965xp4sg80nn2i3q06t> (Accessed: 30 August 2024).

Lepawsky, J. (2024) Interviewed by R. Zheng, 17 September.

Liboiron, M. and Lepawsky, J. (2022) *Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press. Available at: <https://search-ebscohost-com.arts.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2955243&site=ehost-live&scope=site> (Accessed: 28 April 2024).

Scheeren, J. (2013) *Jaap Scheeren Cut Shaving*. Amsterdam: Fw: Books.

Stuart, M. (2024) Interviewed by R. Zheng, 5 June.

Voss, G. (2024) *Systems Ultra: Making Sense of Technology in a Complex World*. London: Verso.

Further references:

G.F Smith (2024) *Paper & the Environment*. Available at: <https://www.gfsmith.com/paper-the-environment> (Accessed: 1 August 2024)

Lorusso, S. (2023) *What design can't do: essays on design and disillusion*. Eindhoven: Set Margins.

Smith, M. (2018) *The U. S. Paper Industry and Sustainable Production: An Argument for Restructuring*. The MIT Press.