Visually documenting dishonesty through the dual modalities of distraction and discomfort

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Visually Documenting Dishonesty through the Dual Modalities of Distraction and Discomfort

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Visually Documenting Dishonesty through the Dual Modalities of Distraction and Discomfort

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*Abstract: This article documents the research methodologies and subsequent multifaceted outcomes of a two-year visual study of lies and truth. By reviewing numerous artefacts created within the context of this research, the dual modalities of distraction and discomfort were discovered to provide a quasi-dyadic coalition to creative strategy, which significantly informed, led, and challenged the creative practice. Accordingly, this article discusses how, when, and where these modalities were implemented, by leveraging from two established academic models that demonstrate the various stages of the creative process. The visual study was structured into two imbricating layers: foremost, an online, anonymous confessional platform, *iliekit.com*; and secondly, the creation of an art book, “The Big Book of Bullshit.” Typographic, illustrative, and photographic artefacts were subsequently created, inspired by these anonymous confessions of dishonesty. This article analyses six cases from this visual study and presents connections between the modalities of distraction and discomfort and effective creative production. In conclusion, this article reviews the potential for further research to develop the dual modalities of distraction and discomfort as both pedagogical frameworks and as practice based creative strategy.*

Keywords: Lies, Trust, Dishonesty, Distraction, Discomfort, Ethical Practice, Graphic Design

Introduction

Dishonesty is a ubiquitous phenomenon that could be considered as part of what makes us human; so much so, that this innate fallibility has become fundamentally ingrained for the successful functionality of our society. Patterson and Kim’s 1991 study *The Day America Told the Truth* revealed that, of all participants surveyed, 90 percent admitted that they had been deceitful. However, based on the research conducted over the course of this two-year study, there is firm ground to speculate that the remaining 10 percent of the poll were almost certainly lying! Assuming that we all lie, to some extent, there still remains the fact that there is a societal paradox that forces us to negatively label those who are deemed liars, and it is these opposing idiosyncrasies that were the defining motivators behind the practice led component of this research.

Society’s relationship between lies and truth is one that is well documented (Ford 1999; Martin 2009; Newman et al. 2003); however, rather than providing a visual understanding, this discourse largely exists as written narrative. The larger scope of this project therefore chose to use graphic design as medium, providing a contribution to the understanding of the *visual* relationship between lies and truth. The project was structured into two imbricating layers: foremost, an online, anonymous confessional platform, *iliekit.com*; and secondly, the creation of an art book, *The Big Book of Bullshit*. Initially the intention was to create a purely print-based outcome; however, this research project did not follow the original stratagem. Quite to the contrary, the author was forced out of a traditionalist comfort zone and into uncharted creative territory on more than one occasion. Yet, upon reflection, it was at the edge of discomfort where growth as a designer and as a researcher occurred, augmenting this project in new and challenging directions.

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The primary focus of this article describes six cases derived from this project and examines them under the lens of the creative strategies utilised, viewing the potential of developing creative practice to visually document dishonesty through the dual modalities of distraction and discomfort.

Methodologies

This article proposes that the dual modalities of distraction and discomfort provide a coalition to creative strategy, which subsequently underpinned and informed creative practice throughout this project. In applying this framework, both consciously and at times serendipitously, the resulting outcomes succeeded in expanding the visual vocabulary of truth, trust, and dishonesty in unexpected and thought provoking ways.

The creative process for this project adopted a mixed methodology utilising both positivistic and phenomenological strategies such as surveys, case studies, and self-reflective action research, all of which were contributory to forming a cohesive creative solution. By straddling a multitude of disciplines, utilising precepts derived from psychology, sociology, and economics and applying these principles to graphic design, this project aimed to cover new ground whilst providing a foundation for further exploration. This article will focus on the application of two of these approaches in the composition of the aforementioned quasi-dyadic modalities of distraction and discomfort. These modalities significantly impacted the creative process at the ideation stage and throughout reflection and iteration processes. The model shown in Figure 1 demonstrates when these strategies were implemented during the design process. This model takes inspiration from Graham Wallas’s (1926) model of the creative process, which denotes four stages of creativity—preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification (see Figure 2)—and is supported by Sapp’s (1992) extension of Wallas’s model, which, significantly for this research, introduces the concept of the *point of creative frustration*. This article understands the point of creative frustration to be (Sapp 1992) the position at which a practitioner may either capitulate or continue on with the task until reaching a creative breakthrough, leading to the point of illumination and ensuing creative growth (see Figure 3).

Figure 1: The Modalities of Distraction and Discomfort as Part of the Creative Process
Source: Winstanley 2018

Figure 2: Redrawn Model Denoting Wallas’s Stages of the Creative Process: Preparation, Incubation, Illumination and Verification, with Kneller’s Addition, First Insight
Source: Wallas 1926

Figure 3: An Extended Model of the Creative Process Exhibiting the Points of Initial Idea Inception, Creative Frustration and Illumination; the Periods of Problem-Solving, Incubation and Growth; and Responses to the Point of Creative Frustration: a) Denial, b) Rationalization, c) Acceptance of Stagnation, and d) New Growth

Source: Sapp 1992

The following two sections of this article discuss how the dual modalities of distraction and discomfort directly, and indirectly, impacted creative outcomes pertinent to the visual documentation of dishonesty, proceeding to then describe how the models of Wallas (1926) and Sapp (1992) were utilised to evaluate where these modalities were successfully implemented within the creative process.

Distraction

What is distraction? “Something that distracts: an object that directs one’s attention away from something else.”² The modality of distraction can be positioned within the incubation portion of both Wallas’s and Sapp’s models. According to Wallas (2014), the incubation stage requires unconscious problem solving, whereby the individual would not consciously attempt to solve the problem at hand. This supports distraction as a well-established technique for creative problem solving, yet up until recently, there has been little research to support this theorem within a graphic design context. This article intends to demonstrate its effective use in the creative process by utilising examples of several artefacts created within this framework to corroborate this proposition. “All profound distraction opens certain doors. You have to allow yourself to be distracted when you are unable to concentrate” (Cortázar 1990, 213).

Case 1a: Bridging Distance

Current literature supports a correlation between partaking in an undemanding, unrelated task and the furtherance of creative problem solving (Agnoli et al. 2018; Baird et al. 2012; Madjar and Shalley 2008). This theory supports the methods undertaken during a creative and experimental component of this project. During the initial development stage, the focus was on refining the creative brief and defining parameters for the project, alongside immersion in ideation. It was at this point where the introduction of a short-term creative brief or, what this article will now refer to as a *bomb project*, was initiated; which, in this instance, served as a distraction from the main research ideation. Whilst current literature supports the hypothesis that mind wandering facilitates creative incubation, according to Baird et al (2012) it is only whilst engaging in an undemanding task, during a limited incubation period, where creative problem solving occurs. Agnoli et al (2018) advance this concept by proffering that it is in a space between deliberate mind wandering (distraction) and a conscious state of mindfulness that

² <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/distraction>. Accessed March 14, 2019.

encourages the introduction of unconnected material into cognition; this can then be mindfully connected to seemingly unrelated concepts. The bomb project applied this strategy for creative release and as a technique for divergent thinking. Switching focus to an unrelated short-term project entitled “Bridging Distance” gave the opportunity to deliberately allow mind wandering and then provide space for reflection on the thoughts and ideas that came up during that time. This yielded a number of potential avenues of exploration but significantly, the creative outcomes derived from this bomb project were able to be connected back to the main research topic in a way that complemented and added value to the overall proposal.

The topic, bridging distance, was particularly broad; therefore, in order to effectively explore within an allocated ten-hour timeframe, a brainstorming strategy was applied utilising a mind-mapping approach (see Figure 4). This was subsequently followed by a period of visual exploration in the form of mood-board generation and rapid ideation sketches (see Figure 5).

Figure 4: Bridging Distance Mind Map
Source: Winstanley 2016

Figure 5: Rapid Ideation Sketches
Source: Winstanley 2016

It was during these short, time-restricted, creative explorations that connections were extracted from a seemingly unrelated topic, interlacing them to the main project's focus of dishonesty by advancing the concept for the *I Lie Kit*. The *I Lie Kit*, a tongue-in-cheek liar's survival kit, included memento items such as truth serum, anti-bullshit spray, a field guide to spotting liars, and novelty pants-on-fire underpants! (see Figures 6 and 7). Decidedly, the bomb project, in its entirety, could certainly be considered as being a cognitively demanding task, as proposed by Baird et al (2012); choosing to divide the activity into smaller less demanding components allowed for deliberate mind wandering, thus resulting in idea generation beyond the directly relevant, which was then, mindfully, connected back to the main project theme.

Figure 6: iliekit Liar's Survival Kit
Source: Winstanley 2016

Figure 7: Iliekit Liar's Survival Kit In Detail
Source: Winstanley 2016

Due to the successful application of the modality of distraction within this component of the project, it was decided to explore further ways in which this method might be applied. The following case discusses those developments.

Case 2a: The Daily Creative Challenge

Research by Oppizzo and Schwartz (2014) suggests that the physical act of walking provides a boost to creative ideation. Based on this premise, this article proposes that the physical act of making may also provide deeper creative cognitive processing. The following case details a series of daily creative challenges that resulted in production of several tangible artefacts, providing both a conduit for creative autonomy during a period of discomfort and an example of the modality of distraction serving as a creative incubator.

The idea for *iliekit.com*, an anonymous online confession platform, was conceived as the result of further development of the *I Lie Kit* survival kit concept, aforementioned in Case 1a. Working on this platform's user interface, the author was challenged by, and acknowledged, the discomfort felt whilst learning to design in a new medium and the resultant steep learning curve that this involved. As a predominantly print-based designer accustomed to working with tactile materials, there was a sense of discomfort generated by creating in a purely digital domain. Accordingly, in order to potentially alleviate said discomfort, a series of daily creative challenges were actively embarked upon that would allow exploration of the more tangible aspects of making and provide a further conduit for deliberate mind wandering to facilitate creative incubation. In order to ensure that these daily challenges remained relatively cognitively undemanding, a series of parameters was set to best facilitate optimal circumstances for incubation. These parameters were as follows:

- Spend fifteen minutes each day creating an item from a predefined creative challenge (see below for list of challenges undertaken; these were derived from pre-existing lists freely available online)
- Challenges should be unrelated to the main project research
- It is irrelevant if the outcome is liked or disliked
- Mindfully and critically reflect on the process and outcome
- The medium is entirely open

The creative challenges for the first week were as follows:

- A self-portrait
- Recycled art
- Floral
- Create something ugly
- Create texture
- Personify an object
- Day-of-the-week lettering

Figure 8: Textures Photographed on an Indoor Art Walk.
Fifth in a Series of Daily Creative Challenges Designed to Facilitate Creative Incubation
Source: Winstanley 2016

Although most of the resulting creative challenges did not directly influence the main project outcomes, the impact of mindfully doing something creative each day significantly affected the overall outlook and approach to the creative process. Artist, Cy Porter's version of this technique, coined as "litteling it to death" (Porter 2012), acknowledges the positive aspects of adequate, fulfilling creative time and observes the correlation between positive artistic experience and the avoidance of inertia. Markedly, it was when working at a tangent where the author was able to let go of any inhibitions to create autonomously, choosing to implement or ignore the results, dependent on their relative success, thus liberating creative thinking. The fifth creative challenge "Create a Texture" (see Figure 8) resulted in an indoor art walk, documenting various textures in and around the home; this brief fifteen-minute experiment led to an idea for further texture generation to support the art book aspect of this project and the subsequent editorial spreads owe their textured aesthetic to this initial distraction technique (see Figure 10). Madjar and Shalley's (2008) research into the effect of multiple tasks and multiple goals on creativity support this finding, by demonstrating high levels of creativity when tasks had specific goals and the individual used their own discretion to switch between tasks. It could therefore be speculated that it was the ability to autonomously switch between creative tasks that cultivated creative incubation and yielded the capacity to move past the point of creative frustration to the subsequent point of illumination.

Figure 9: Spread from *The Big Book of Bullshit* Created From Inspiration Derived from a Period of Incubation Utilising Physical Making as a Distraction Technique
Source: Winstanley 2016

In summary, by applying the dual modalities of distraction and discomfort, the author was able to satisfy an intrinsic motivation to design tangible objects, which offered respite from pixel pushing and also provided a satisfactory amount of cognitive distraction from the main project problems in order to facilitate creative incubation. The successful application of this process for creative development suggests an avenue for further research, from a pedagogical perspective in teaching design and also for the designer wishing to explore alternative methods for divergent thinking. This article will now move on to discuss the modality of discomfort as a creative catalyst.

Discomfort

What is discomfort? "To make uncomfortable or uneasy."³ The modality of discomfort occurred as an instigator to creative problem solving and could, therefore, sit within Sapp's (1992) model at the problem-solving preparation stage; nonetheless, discomfort could also work in tandem with

³ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discomfort>. Accessed March 14, 2019.

the modality of distraction at the incubation stage, or follow on from Sapp's (1992) point of creative frustration to provide illumination and subsequent creative growth. This article intends to demonstrate the efficacy of discomfort as a creative strategy by evidencing and analysing four cases of creative artefacts inspired by the concepts of trust and deceit, each created within this framework at various stages of the creative problem solving model.

"With ideas it is like with dizzy heights you climb: At first they cause you discomfort and you are anxious to get down, distrustful of your own powers; but soon the remoteness of the turmoil of life and the inspiring influence of the altitude calm your blood; your step gets firm and sure and you begin to look - for dizzier heights" (Tesla 1897).

Case 1b: And All the Devils are Here

Dealing with the sensitive topic of trust and dishonesty, there were many questions raised, such as: at what point does this project become ethically questionable?; should boundaries be broken?; and if so, at what cost? Answers were expected and it was hypothesised that lines would be drawn in relation to local cultural perspectives; however, there was no anticipation that this would be under negative circumstances. In order to fund production of the art book aspect of this project, a Kickstarter campaign was set up (Kickstarter is a public, crowd-funding website, which allows users to pledge financial support to facilitate completion of a creative project). At the time this research was conducted, the author was employed in a conservative area in the Middle East and unfortunately there was a complaint made by an anonymous faculty member to the author's employers. The complaint stemmed from disapproval of the contents of the public Kickstarter campaign and, whilst the author made every attempt to be considerate of the local culture, someone took offence to the project's content. This complaint resulted in instruction to take down the project from Kickstarter and after the months of hard work in putting the campaign together, there was a real sense of discomfort.

The situation was unexpected and, without a doubt, disappointing; however, as a direct reaction to this discomfort, the author proceeded to produce a piece of artwork. This was done in an attempt at dealing with these negative emotions, and upon reflection, it is apparent that doing so served as a form of creative therapy. Rollo May (cited in Whitlock 2011) deduces that creativity can be enhanced when an individual acknowledges their anxieties, drawing upon this as form of self-assertion in creative expression. This paradigm served as a tool for growth within creative practice and enabled inspired work from this place of self-awareness.

The resulting piece, although quite a significant deviation from the author's usual working methods, fostered a sense of emotional relief to the discomfort that arose from the unexpected and difficult situation. Practice-based evidence of design as therapy is also supported by Naumberg, who defines therapeutic graphic art as "a form of symbolic speech" (Naumberg cited in Case and Dalley 2014, 2), which could provide a surrogate form of expression when words are incongruous or inaccessible. This article suggests that the creative process of making provided a conduit for anger diversion, and the discomfort itself provided a source of inception for the ideation process. In this instance, by reviewing the models of Wallas (1926) and Sapp (1992) (see Figures 2 and 3), it is apparent that discomfort served as a preparator, incubator, and illuminator in the creative process. The subsequent artefact generated (see Figure 10) provides a visual narrative of betrayal, as the cause of discomfort, both metaphorically and literally.

Figure 10: And All the Devils are Here: Design Through Discomfort
Source: Winstanley 2016

Case 2b: Pushing Pixels

Whilst the underlying premise of the graphical exploration of lies and truth remained at the core of the generation of artefacts, the process, materials, techniques, and methods were all significantly revised to accommodate the design and launch of an online confessional platform. Up until the onset of this project, the author had predominantly worked with traditional media and, accordingly, tackling user interface design presented some noteworthy challenges. Consequently, by re-evaluating this project's objectives and steering it toward a multimedia approach, there also had to be a re-evaluation of personal perceptions towards graphic design.

The modality of discomfort was an intrinsic motivator in accelerating this particular creative direction, and this notion is supported by acclaimed designer Paula Scher in her talk *Do What You've Never Done Before* (2012). In reference to her work on designing for the Metropolitan High School, Scher (2012) states, "what was the most exciting thing for me about getting it made was I wasn't sure how it was gonna [sic] come out. I didn't totally know what I was doing." Decidedly, it appears that a sense of discomfort can lead to risk-taking decisions and, subsequently, innovative, exploratory research. This theory is empirically supported by Dewett's (2007) study linking intrinsic motivation, risk taking, and employee creativity. Dewett (2007, 204) states "evidence is provided that the effect of intrinsic motivation on creativity is transmitted through an increased willingness to take risks." Exploring design through multimedia proved to be a critical component in the success of this project, with the launch of the online platform providing a portal for anonymous confession and in turn, a source of rich quantitative and qualitative data to draw from; however, the learning curve was steep, resulting in personal discomfort and unease. Referring to Sapp's (1992) model of the creative process (see Figure 3), discomfort, in this instance, was evidenced as a source of creative development at three points during the creative process: firstly, during the problem-solving stage—deciding to create an online platform with little prior experience; secondly, leading to the point of creative frustration—many failed attempts and iterations of user interface design; and thirdly, leading to growth from the point of illumination—user testing and the successful launch of the online platform.

The following case will now discuss in more detail the potential for discomfort during the preparation stage of the creative process, in direct response to the anonymous confessions of lies.

Figure 11: Ilikeit.com Desktop Site
Source: Winstanley 2016

Figure 12: Ilikeit.com Mobile Site
Source: Winstanley 2016

Case 3b: Superheros

Human beings are all fallible; we are all imperfect and no matter how much we profess to being an honest person, it is in our very nature to lie. According to lie detector and author Pamela Meyer (2011), “we lie anywhere between 10–200 times per day.” The *iliekit.com* website was conceived to allow users to confess to their lies in a safe, anonymous, online environment, providing a platform for users to not only confess to their lies but to also pass judgment by commenting on the lies of others, thus, questioning the construct of this social paradox. On a regular basis, a graphical artefact inspired by a confession would be created. This artwork would

then be displayed publicly on the site creating a visual narrative to lead the viewer into making assumptions and judgements surrounding the context of each deception.

Some of the most disturbing confessions received via the online confessional platform were that two people had lied about having cancer. Whilst the author personally found these lies to be deplorable, the objective of this project was not to become a moralistic judge and jury, but rather to explore boundaries and degrees of social acceptance. Nevertheless, the discomfort felt in acknowledging that people were able to lie about issues of such seriousness was intense, resulting in the dilemma of allowing morality to guide this project, or to act impartially and visualise these disturbing confessions to provide an unbiased representation of societies' propensity to lie to the extreme. After much deliberation, the latter option was chosen.

It was never the intention to dispute or trivialise the seriousness of this horrific disease but instead attempt to create an accolade to those that are fighting it. Nevertheless, the resulting piece forces the audience out of their comfort zone and was specifically created *from* a place of discomfort, with the intention to *cause* discomfort for the viewer; raising questions such as who would lie about something like this?; could you lie about something like this?; and, what could possibly have been so terrible that this lie was the only way out?

This case, once again, describes the modality of discomfort as an instigator for creativity. In this context, discomfort became cyclic, initially stemming from the first insight, as a catalyst for creativity, into the preparation stage of the creative process, and morphing into the outcome in the form of a creative artefact (see Figure 13). This article will now present a fourth case discussing anonymity as a means to bypass discomfort in a social context, thus providing an outlet for unimpeded creativity.

Figure 13: I have Cancer Confession. Illustration Created for *The Big Book of Bullshit* Based on Anonymous Confessions
Source: Winstanley 2016

Case 4b: Anonymity as a Means to Challenge and Extricate Discomfort

It is from a paradoxical standpoint that this project aimed to highlight ethical issues such as the justification of a lie; for example, if more good ensues than harm, does the end thereby justify the means? By creating a visual dialogue, the facets of this aspect of the creative project attempted to elicit acknowledgement of dishonesty and its necessity for society's function. It also aimed to

propagate discourse on where that ethical line should be drawn, raising questions such as when does a lie become harmful?, what is a socially acceptable lie?, and where do these lines become blurred?, thus examining the notion and fragility of trust. Decidedly, this article proposes that the element of anonymity led to a far greater divulgence from iliekit.com participants. It is this anonymity that fostered the necessary degree of trust within the online confessional platform, subsequently accommodating interlocution in a far more spontaneous manner than if the lies were publicly confessed. This should be acknowledged as a pivotal aspect to the functionality and outcomes of the project.

This is also perhaps reflective of the Middle Eastern society, in which this project took place. In such a conservative environment, desires and needs are seldom public knowledge, presumably for fear of reprisal or judgement. Confessions of lies of a sexual nature featured regularly on the platform, directly contradicting the religious doctrines and societal precepts of the region, which suggests that the anonymity of this project may have offered an element of escapism from the conformity of these societal demands (see Figure 14). This proposal is supported by literature on anonymous communication applications. According to Kang, Dabbish, and Sutton (2016), online communities view anonymity as a coping strategy to manage converging and burdensome social boundaries; anonymity provides a way to circumnavigate or even abnegate these responsibilities without repercussion, if only for a limited time period.

Whist the previous three case studies discussed the addition of discomfort as being a catalyst in idea inception, idea incubation, and at the point of illumination, this particular case reviews the extrication of discomfort as an integral aspect of the project's success. Accordingly, it would seem apparent that there is an optimum level of discomfort required to generate a creative response. Evidenced by these case studies, this article speculates that this level could be derived by either elevating a situation from the status quo to cause discomfort or by reducing the pre-existence of situational discomfort to provide a secure environment for effective creativity. This article suggests that further research is warranted to potentially further measure optimal levels of discomfort for creative output within a graphic design context.

Figure 14: The Only thing I lie about is My Virginity.
Illustration Created for *The Big Book of Bullshit* Based on Anonymous Confessions
Source: Winstanley 2016

Based on the four cases described, along with supporting empirical evidence, this article argues that developing creative practice through the modality of discomfort has the potential to be a successful strategic approach for designers wishing to push their creative boundaries. It has been evidenced that this stratagem is applicable at a number of stages throughout the creative process: firstly, at project inception serving as a catalyst for creativity; secondly, at incubation stage, serving as a motivator and spurring exploratory creative practice; and lastly, occurring at the point of creative frustration providing illumination.

A Quasi-Dyadic Coalition to Creative Strategy

At the offset, this article proposed that the dual modalities of distraction and discomfort provided a quasi-dyadic coalition to creative strategy. Through documenting a substantial number of practice based cases, each supported by rigorous academic studies, it is this article's belief that that claim is substantiated and, accordingly, warrants further research into developing these strategies as a pedagogical framework for creative development. However, it is also important to acknowledge several limitations in this premise. Distraction is documented as enhancing creative development only under specific circumstances, specifically by partaking in a cognitively undemanding task for a limited incubation period, to accommodate deliberate mind wandering. It is therefore essential to provide tasks that adequately meet these conditions to maximise rather than minimise creative development. It is also important to establish that the distraction task itself is considered and controlled rather than merely facilitating a multi-tasking cognitive overload with no clear goals or outcomes.

Discomfort as a tool for creative development also shows capacity for application as a pedagogical framework both singularly and as part of a dyadic relationship with distraction. Yet this is also potentially a problematic direction to follow dependent on the level and source of discomfort and the individual recipient of said discomfort. There is a real need for clear communication and non-malicious, mindful application of the strategy for this to prove a successful modality for practical application.

Conclusion

The exploratory visual study, described in this article via six case studies, was intentionally structured into a number of separate deliverables in order to investigate various aspects of truth, trust, and dishonesty. Adopting a varied approach supported the application of a number of research methodologies and strategies within a singular, structured project, thus creating the opportunity to explore a wide range of creative techniques, technologies, and sources of information, which, ultimately, increased and sustained opportunities for creative innovation. Through the lens of this personal creative practice, the dual modalities of distraction and discomfort were discovered to be key strategies for creative exploration and facilitated production of artefacts exploring the visual language of truth, trust, and dishonesty. Many of the outcomes presented in these six cases not only offer a glimpse into the reticent world of others' deception but also request us to confront notions of our own truths, providing a lens for introspection, no matter how distracting or discomforting that may be.

Figure 15: The Multi-Award-Winning Art Book *The Big Book of Bullshit*
Source: Winstanley 2016

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