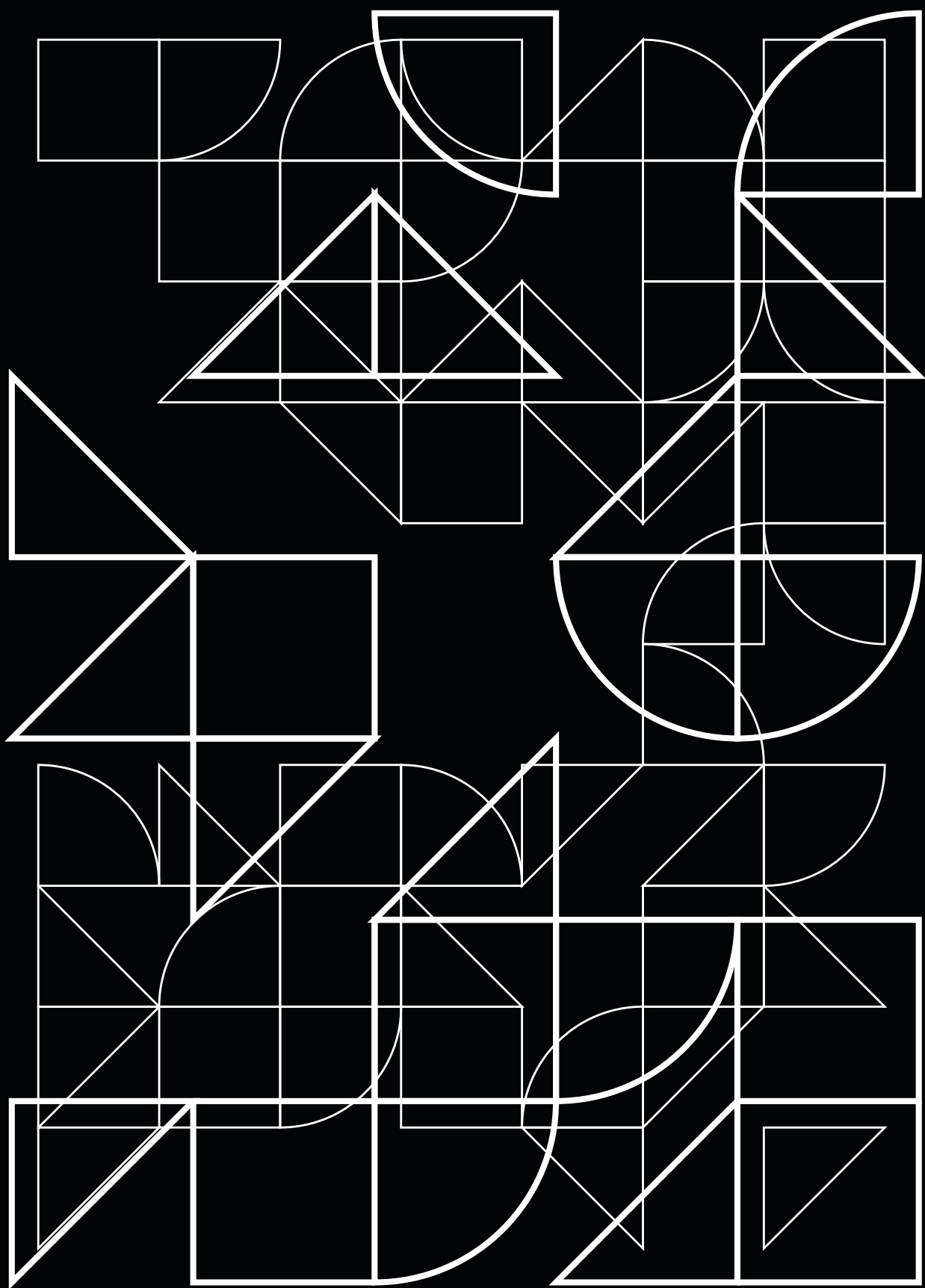


Kate is founder and creative director of Kate Dawkins Studio, which specialises in designing and delivering bespoke digital content for shows, brand events and live performances. She has worked with brands ranging from the London 2012 Olympics to Adidas and Elton John, and won a BAFTA for her work on World War One Remembered. www.katedawkinsstudio.com

PLAYING WITH LIGHT & DARK

KATE DAWKINS TURNS PIXELS AND PROJECTION INTO JAW-DROPPING LIVE EXPERIENCES THAT HAVE ENTRANCED AUDIENCES AROUND THE WORLD. HERE, SHE SHARES THE STORIES BEHIND THE SHOWS.

WORDS: RUTH HAMILTON ■ PORTRAITS: WILLIAM MATHIE ■ PHOTOGRAPHS: JULIAN HAMILTON – ONE ANOTHER



Right and opening imagery: Dawkins creates abstract artworks using the roll of a die to place shapes on a predefined grid.

Opposite top: 90 minutes of projection mapping for *Intimissimi On Ice* – a mix of opera, ice-skating and pop – in the Arena of Verona.

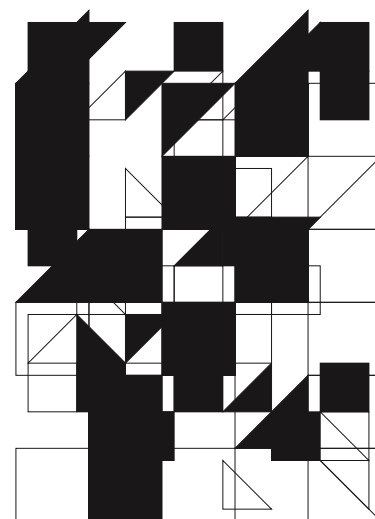
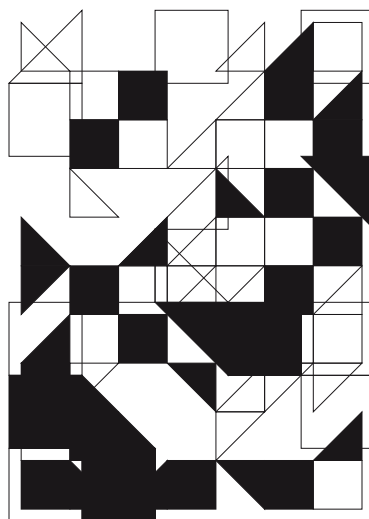
Opposite bottom: Tricky projection mapping onto legendary aircraft carrier, the USS *Intrepid*, for the launch of the new Land Rover Discovery Concept in New York.

Below: Dawkins is creative director at Kate Dawkins Studio, which she launched in 2016.



It is a little difficult to accurately sum up Kate Dawkins' job. Along with the rest of her team at her self-titled studio, Dawkins works with LEDs and projection to create large-scale visuals. But that really doesn't capture the magic of her work: Epic visuals bringing vehicle stunts to life for *Fast & Furious Live*; mesmerising projections commemorating a bloody WWI battle (which snagged a BAFTA, no less); an innovative, interactive experience showcasing Adidas' performance technologies. Oh, and remember the jaw-droppingly good London 2012 opening and closing ceremonies? She had a hand in that, too. We caught up with Dawkins after her talk at Design Manchester to find out how she does it.

What was it about experience design that initially attracted you?
I never intentionally sought to work



in this area, I've just sort of found myself here. But now I am here, I love the buzz of a live show. I always think that the audience completes the process. It's such a thrill to see the experience through the audience's eyes.

Your big shift into creating large-scale visuals came after you worked on the video for the re-release of Elton John's Are You Ready For Love? Tell us a bit about that...

The Elton John video was seen by [American photographer and director] David LaChapelle. He wanted the same designs for the LED visuals for Elton's Las Vegas show, which he was art directing. This was my first proper venture into the world of live performance. I loved it, and was hooked. It was hard work, but there was something about the thrill of the unknown.

The next project was the MTV Awards, which threw up new problems — it was more of an architectural space, with a hi-res LED back wall and a lo-res floor. It's these new challenges, each time, which interest me so much.

Why did you decide to launch Kate Dawkins Studio?

I was starting to get enquiries about direct commissions to

design and direct screen content. I had a beautiful logo, identity and website (not by me, may I add, but by Bibliotheque Design — it would still be unfinished now otherwise!), so I thought, why not? And over a bottle of wine with a friend, decided it was a good idea to start the studio.

In hindsight, I'm not sure I'd recommend this route. I had no business plan; no real plan at all. I plunged headlong into finding a space and kitting it out. Because of the lack of planned structure, the process has definitely been harder. But I learnt so much about business; I still do every day.

Tell us a bit about how you operate as a studio...

The studio functions as a lean and agile model. I currently head up all productions with the support of talented and experienced producers. We then put together a team that is fit for purpose for each project. This ensures we have the best possible team to deliver the best work.

How has the industry changed since you've been working in this area?

Experiences are everything and everywhere now. Clients want to launch their brands in a 'never-seen-before, wow!' way, embracing not just the simple back screen, ▶





but sophisticated real-time technologies to create an experience that is truly 'live'.

What technological developments have made the biggest impact on how you work?

The ability to pre-visualise the work. In the past we've been held to limited methods of seeing how the work is going to look ahead of the event, but recently we have started to use real-time software called Previz, which allows us to view the work on the structure, moving around the space to review and assess what does and does not work.

That said, that's still screen-based. We've also used VR, which allows the viewer to see the content at life-size, thus being able to spot incorrect alignments or errors. That's one of the main problems we have: we work on 27-inch screens, making content for structures that can sometimes easily be over 100 metres in size.

Have advancements in VR had a big impact on how you work, or is the technology still not quite there yet?

Using VR to help pre-visualise how the work would look on Cloth Hall [for the World War One Remembered project] was the first experience I've had with using VR for this purpose. The render of the building I was seeing wasn't the highest quality, but being able to view everything at an accurate scale was mind-blowing.

I think the technology is definitely there to allow both the team and clients to preview work 'in situ', so to speak. Removing any nasty shocks by showing clients the work in context has to be the next best thing to being there.

You spoke about retaining an element of analogue in your designs. Why is this important?

I find digital work wonderfully clean, sharp and precise. Everything

is counted and measured in pixels. There's a sense of hand-crafted about analogue. It's unpredictable. Human-touched. The element of craft is vital in the work the Kate Dawkins Studio produces.

How do you adapt in the event of technical failures?

Technology and content combined allows for some amazing opportunities. It's a truly exciting world to work in, but they are always reliant on each other — you need them both working to the best possible levels to make the best experience. We can spend months creating content, but if an LED fails or the projectors specified aren't strong enough, it doesn't matter how good the content is.

In particular, before setting up the studio I worked on a project called Adidas Lab with a very talented company called Kin Design. It was an interactive experience, that involved lots of complex assets all coming together: pre-rendered content, overlaid with interactive content, sensors and live-edits; the whole experience being driven by RFID sensor. The morning Adidas Lab opened, an extremely senior member of Adidas was visiting. We turned everything on to test, and it all went crazy. The graphics were glitching, the sensor lights were swinging around. It was like something possessed.

Fortunately, as we were standing there aghast, one of the team noticed that the plinth that held the RFID reader had been moved. On quick inspection they found the cables were touching and thus sending bogus signals out. With quick reactions by the team, the whole experience came back to life moments before the important guests entered the room.

It seems there's always an element of unpredictability when there are people interacting with your work...



Opposite above: To commemorate the centenary of Passchendaele, Third Battle of Ypres, the UK government hosted an epic multimedia show, including projection from Dawkins. Dawkins won a BAFTA for the project.

Opposite below: Dawkins worked on two of the largest interactive activities at the Adidas lab event, which took part over the UEFA Champions League Final weekend.

Have the public ever responded in a way you did not expect?

Not really. All clients rightly want to create a big impact, and most of the time audiences are seemingly delighted with what they're viewing. However we did do a job for the launch of a Samsung product. We created the opening film to build anticipation ahead of the big reveal, and when it ended the audience immediately got onto social media, so only a few clapped. In such a large audience it felt terribly underwhelming!

What has been the project that has challenged you the most so far, in terms of trying new things?

Definitely the World War One Remembered project. Before we undertook this project we had never really worked on any projection mapping of this kind. I'm not sure if the client knew this when we were



Above: For London 2012's 'audience pixels', Dawkins designed content that played out across the 70,500 'paddles' of nine high-powered LEDs fixed to the arena seats.

Below: D&AD Pencils awarded for the 2012 Olympics Audience Pixels and a Doves music video.



chosen to take the project forward! But there were additional challenges: the audience viewing angle was three-quarters onto the building, which meant not only did we have two sides of the building to work with, but also two sides of the clock tower. The clock face took over part of the design canvas. We also had to deal with the ornate building facade, which had we been viewing straight-on wouldn't have posed nearly as much of a challenge.

Are there any aspects of your job that you didn't anticipate or think you'd be getting into?

I have been doing this kind of work for many years now, and each project throws up something you didn't anticipate. Every project is so different. There is a core process that we follow for each project; concepting stage, design phase, production, etc. But guaranteed, along the way something will rear its head that you'd have never thought of. Sometimes drawings are wrong and you find out halfway through the project that where you thought the audience would be standing isn't where they're standing, and you're suddenly having to re-assess and in some cases redesign, everything.

You also mentioned the prints you do, which are designed based on a dice throw. It feels quite opposite to your experience design work. Would you agree with that?

In stark contrast to my day job, I create these hand-drawn pen and ink artworks, which are

based around a pre-structured grid and aesthetic formula. The throw of the dice then places the geometric shapes or lines within this grid. There is an element of decision-making, as the grid and the component parts are formalised prior to starting, but I love the sense of the unknown, the loss of control, of having to accept what you end up with. I created 365 artworks (one a day) a couple of years back and hope to turn them into a digital installation. So perhaps the two sides of my work are more aligned than it seems.

Most of the work you do will be temporary. What are your thoughts on that?

I don't tend to think about it that much, really. There's something magical and special about it only being viewed for a brief time. A moment in time, so it's even more important to make sure you leave a lasting impression, something that will stay with the viewer... at least until they get home. ▣