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GRAPHIC DESIGN

PRACTICE & EDUCATION

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CHAPTER 1

Articles

Writings on Graphic Design Education

- 02** **Design as Contemplative Practice**
Thomas Ockerse | Rhode Island School of Design, USA
- 07** **Creative, Inventive, and Visual Approaches to Design Problem Solving**
John DeMao | Virginia Commonwealth University, USA
- 12** **Outside Institute**
Scott Hutchinson | University of California Los Angeles, USA
Co-Authors: Bill Longhauser, and Ann Enkoji
- 16** **Visual Culture, Community, and Distance**
John Bowers | Oregon State University, USA
Karen White | University of Arizona, USA
- 22** **Learning, Process, and Designing**
Donald Tarallo | Samsung Art & Design Institute, Korea
- 26** **On the Turning Away**
Halim Choueiry | VCU Qatar, Qatar
- 29** **Photographic Essay: A Way to Construct Reality**
Tak-Ping Tsang | Hong Kong Polytechnic University, China
- 36** **Descriptive Terminology: Visualization, Creative, and Ideation**
John Drew | California State University, Fullerton, USA
- 46** **Conceptor: Creating the Value of a Concept**
Albert Young Choi | Hanyang University, Korea
- 56** **Creative Waves: An Online Global Creative Communication: Students, Educators and Professionals Explore Collaborative Modes of Creative Interaction, Conversation and Working Process**
Rick Bennett | University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
Vince Dziekan | Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
- 68** **Poetry in Motion**
Sarah A. Meyer | California State Polytechnic University
- 80** **Issue Based Design Education: Dealing with Social Issue in a Graphic Design Curriculum**
Paula DiMarco | California State University, Northridge, USA
- 86** **The Whitney Clothesline**
Scott Santoro | Pratt Institute, USA

DESIGN BEHAVIORS

Photographic Essay: A Way to Construct Reality

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The BA (Hons) in Design programme of the School of Design, Hong Kong Polytechnic University is at the moment under curriculum revision to accommodate the education budget cut of the government¹ and the Design Task Force report², which reviews design as a whole in Hong Kong and its development in the region. The reformed curriculum will be implemented in the academic year 2005/2006, commencing in September 2005. The core change of the reform is to streamline the programme from a multidisciplinary teaching and learning approach³ to a more focused discipline-specific one, with multidisciplinary elements only in the later stage of the programme. The programme philosophy is redirected to put emphasis on humanistic-based design in line with the development of design in the contemporary world. Three basic elements are to contribute to the new approach: the technique or technology of craft production, the understanding of the psychological, social and cultural needs that conditions the use of designs and the awareness of aesthetic appeal of forms⁴.

Introduction

This essay discusses the teaching methods of Design Study 1- Commonplace, a subject of the transitional period. Several teaching experiments in accordance with the programme philosophy are being conducted before the new curriculum is to be fully implemented one semester later. The discussion concentrates mainly on the learning process and outcomes of the students of the Visual Communication discipline, who I taught with a part-time tutor. The essay also touches on the issue of teaching and learning design concepts from the West in a local context where the historical and cultural specificities may not suit the direct import of western concepts.

The project, Design Study 1- Commonplace, is the first design project for students of all design disciplines including Environmental Design, Industrial Design and Visual Communication Design. The students have already equipped themselves with some of the fundamental knowledge and skills of design in semester one, year one. The project is followed by four other design studies covering the themes of consumer culture, ecology, information and communication, and design future in three consecutive semesters. All design studies are supported by Professional Specific Skill subjects, which are skill-based workshops running parallel with design studies. Out of the total number of 110 students, 45 are in the Visual Communication discipline taught by two tutors.

The subject is project-based, which enables students to make use of their everyday experience as the starting point for considering the interaction of designs in complex situations. Through a range of photographic explorations and 'real life' investigations, students identify and appreciate design issues in everyday social contexts. This appreciation provides the basis for their own design initiatives for the photographic essays. In this design study students learn more about the process of design and the ways designers can use commonplace objects to generate new ideas.

¹ The budget cut makes the graduation requirement of 108 credits to be changed to 90 credits from 2005/2006 academic year onwards.

² Shaping the Future: Design for Hong Kong, commonly known as the Design Task Force report in the education sector, was published by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 2003. It is a strategic review of design education and practice in Hong Kong. It also identifies opportunities for design development in Hong Kong in relation to Mainland China and the Asian Pacific region.

³ When the credit system was implemented by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 1998, the BA (Hons) in Design programme of the School of Design adopted a multidisciplinary approach so that 110 students of design disciplines including Culture and Theory, Environmental, Fashion, Industrial, Interactive Systems, Visual Communication and Combined Studies could have a taste of all disciplines. The approach is commented by the Design Task Force as training students to be "Jacks of all trades but master of none". Thus the School is required to review the curriculum to make it more focused and structured.

⁴ Richard Buchanan, Rhetoric, Humanism, and Design in Richard Buchanan and Victor Margolin (eds), 1995. *Discovering Design*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. P.50.

Photographic essay

The project is divided into four phases with specific tasks and objectives. PHASE 1 deals with exploration of a chosen object from the daily life and its relationships with all the elements involved in the photographic process in order to generate an abstract concept; PHASE 2 concerns the context or site to apply the abstract concept to develop a photographic essay; PHASE 3 focuses on concept development through photographic experiments and PHASE 4 is the conclusion in which students are required to present the final outcome with a project documentation in the form of a log book.

The teaching format of the project includes lectures, seminars, tutorials, workshops and critiques. Deliverables include a photographic essay, a log book and a self evaluation.

Phase 1: Visual research on everyday objects

The first phase enables students to use a camera as both a recording tool and an analytical/exploratory tool to experiment with an object in any or as many ways as the student can think of. They are asked to relate the object to all the elements involved in the photographic process like light, sensitive materials etc. The aim is to look for abstract ideas which can be used in the later phases as concepts, themes, tools or metaphors for the photographic essay.

Workshops are offered in the weekly Professional Specific Study subject, which runs parallel to the project to teach basic photographic techniques, darkroom techniques and photogram. Lectures on visual representation, 'photography' and object, and critical history of photography are provided as theoretical backup. Weekly group tutorial provides chances for students to exchange ideas and experience, and to seek advice from tutors.

Phase 2: Context/site

In this stage students choose a commonplace 'Context' or 'Site' on which to apply the ideas they found in Phase 1 and use them to develop a photographic essay.

Lectures on the relationship among the photographer, the image and the subject, and the construction of photographic realities are conducted to make students aware of the political role of the photographer as a story-teller in a social context. It also helps students to challenge the conventional ways of story-telling.

Phase 3: Audience and Design development

The third phase defines the target audience and to specify the design approach and undertake experiments on storytelling in the formats of sequence and series.

Workshop on presentation technique is offered to stress on the presentation quality including materials, finishes and details.

Phase 4: Preparation for presentation

At the end of Phase 4 the process concludes with final presentations and critiques. Students are asked to not only show their final photographic essay, but also a summary of the ideas and research.

They are also required to submit a log book in which the whole process is documented, and a self evaluation is required to review the design process.

Learning Outcomes

In order to achieve the expected learning outcomes, the project tutors have to make the students aware of the cultural characteristics of Hong Kong Chinese, in particular the ways they see photography.

Hong Kong is ruled by the Chinese government under the promise of “**one country, two systems**” in which capitalism is the system that Hong Kong people are enjoying. And, the society of Hong Kong is exactly, to borrow Susan Sontag’s term, ‘**a culture based on images**’.⁵ Everyday Hong Kong people are visually bombarded by images of all kinds and their lifestyles are totally dictated by the images imposed by a typical capitalist society. However, in terms of their notions of the meaning of photography (of themselves), they inherit and apply the values of morality and decorum deeply rooted in the traditional Chinese visual culture.

On one Christmas Eve some twenty years ago, the former Head of the School of Design, who was a photographer from U.K., strolled along the promenade in the Tsimshatsui area. He was astonished to encounter tens of thousands of local people celebrating the festival by photographing the happy faces of friends and families with the Christmas decorations hanging outside the buildings as backdrops. Everyone had, at least, one camera. He never saw so many well equipped ‘photographers’ at the same time in the same place taking the same photographic action. To him, what he saw was very promising and he believed that photography was a popular subject in Hong Kong and the belief gave birth to the first photographic design degree course ever in Asia. Unfortunately due to under enrolment, after running for several years, the course was merged into the Visual Communication discipline in 1998.

It seemed there was something missing between the aspirations of the huge pool of photographers and the expectation of the course. In fact, the School was not aware of the discrepancy between the dominant paradigms⁶ of modernist photography in the West and the secular tradition of Chinese visual culture. The imported photographic practice was only relevant to a very small group of people who would like to pursue photography as a career as it is practiced in other parts of the world. To Hong Kong Chinese in general, cameras are useful or pictures are meaningful only when they are needed or taken in the ‘important’ circumstances of family gatherings, marriages, celebrations, graduations, trips etc. “...[Not] only are there proper subjects for the camera, those which are positive, inspirational...and orderly, but there are proper ways of photographing, which derive from notions about the moral order of space that preclude the very idea of photographic seeing... this is, one supposes, partly because of certain old conventions of decorum in conduct and imagery...”⁷

In teaching (the western concepts of) photography to Hong Kong Chinese students, we have to make them aware of the visual culture in which they are brought up and the kinds of challenge they may have to face when working on the project. Photography is a medium they are familiar with as part of the production process – the roles as the photographer, the subject, the viewer, but not the way the programme wants them to be. A lecture on visual representation in the beginning of the project can help students understand the fundamental issues concerning representation in different cultural contexts, in particular, their context. Hence, a paradigm shift in the students’ mind of the conception of photography could be achieved as soon as the project starts.

⁵ Susan Sontag, 1979. *On Photography*. London: Penguin. p.178.

⁶ Stuart Hall (ed), 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage. P.78-80.

⁷ Sontag was referring to the criticism of Antonioni’s documentary film *Chung Kuo* (China) published in the Chinese newspaper *Renmin Ribao* in 1974. The same could still be applicable today, even in Hong Kong, a model metropolis of all cities in China.

The followings are three examples of students' works which fulfill the requirements of the project nicely. And, the diversity of the processes of the explorations they have gone through are interestingly attractive.

STUDENT WORK 1

TITLE OF PROJECT: Connections

STUDENT: Yiu Yu-hoi

The object Yiu Yu-hoi chose in Phase 1 was the multi-sockets commonly used in Hong Kong families. While doing the workshop practices in the Professional Specific Study subject, he analyzed the function, appearance and the symbolic meanings of the object and came up with the idea of connection in the first presentation. He then paid his first visit to the site, Mongkok and Yau Ma Tei area of the Kowloon peninsula. He chose them in order to apply the idea in an appropriate context. He was confused by the hustle and bustle of the area, a place full of shopping centres and young people. He did not think his idea can be worked out there. He only came back with one contact sheet of images. Not very convincing.

He then went there again to test his luck. He went into the fruit market (wholesale) and made a very good portrait of a Pakistan worker there. He stopped when he was shouted by a hawker. At that moment, he was not sure if the photograph was good enough to connect to the idea and to be developed into a photographic essay. He had no idea how to ask the second sitter... and the third one and so on. Apparently people in the fruit market were not friendly and open to invitation. Plus, that was his first time to take up a camera to photograph strangers. It was not difficult to imagine the difficulty he was facing. During the tutorial, he was introduced to photographers who used similar approach like Arnold Newman and Richard Avedon, and the Magnum photographers. He was reminded that those were the conventional ways of photographic essay. There were rooms to expand and extend. We also discussed the tactics of approaching people with a camera.



Eventually he was inspired and encouraged by David Seymour's statement "*if your pictures aren't good enough, you aren't close enough*". In total, he visited there four times, with very fruitful outcome. In the final presentation, he presented a series of 12 portraits of shop-keepers, workers and customers to reveal how he, the photographer, connects the people in the fruit market and his audience by means of photography. From the intuitive reactions of the photographer reflected in the photographs, no one can imagine that is the first portraiture project the photographer produced. All the audience can read is a group of respectful people in the fruit market. The respect is delivered by the good intent of the photographer – obvious humanistic concern.



STUDENT WORK 2

TITLE OF PROJECT: Space in Photographic Realities
STUDENT: Chan Ka-wing

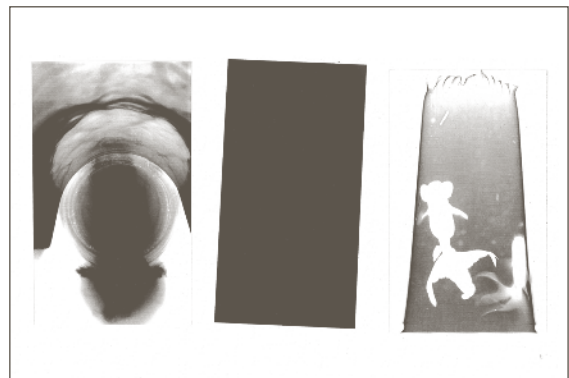
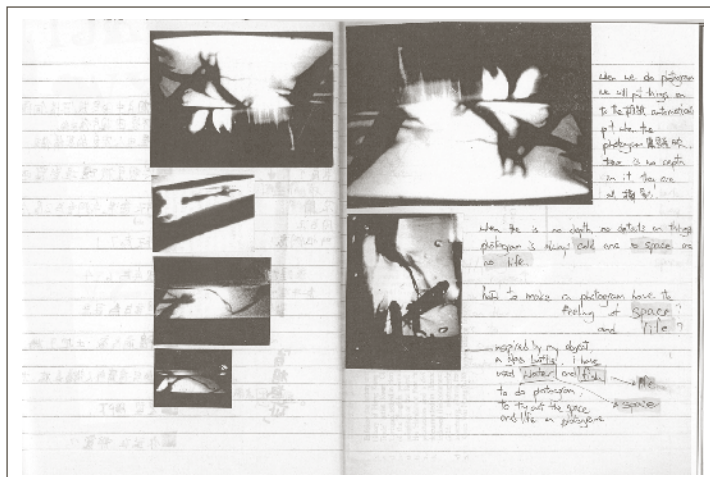
Chan Ka-wing started the project with a milk bottle to explore the (dis)illusion of space on photographic paper. He tested the spatial effects of it in the darkroom where he produced photogram. The thickness of the bottle was flattened, the typographic elements around the bottle became overlays and the refractions of light created unexpected texture. Inspired by the transparency of the bottle he also made use of a plastic bag of gold fish in water. With multiple exposures the image was very rich. The visual effects were poetic, yet stunning.

The ambiguity of photographic meanings⁸ made him rethink the different levels of meanings embedded in a photographic image. In Phase 2, he intended to explore the spiritual level of meaning to see the ways reality worked on that level. To him, the reading of photographic meanings is a continuous process with residues of the previous readings being carried forward and backward. It was never a linear path of reading.

His chosen site was a pedestrian tunnel in which he further explored the possibilities of space in photographic terms. He saw the entrance/exit and the exit/entrance connected to form a cyclic pathway. The way people walked in the cycle was analogous to the reading of photographic meanings. The scenes people saw in the tunnel overlapped with one another to form multi-layered visual information.

In the final presentation, Ka-wing presented a series of 7 black and white photographs with visually rich spatial effects and multiple images. Compared to the previous case of Yu-hoi, Ka-wing abandoned the conventional ways of story-telling and adopted a more self-reflective approach. The meanings are not directly given but ambiguous as if the underlying meanings buried under the first layer of meaning are unearthed all at the same time. His concerns were emphasized more on the technique and technology of craft production and psychological needs. The final outcome also reflected his awareness of the aesthetic appeal of forms.

⁸ Students learnt about photographic ambiguity in one of the lectures when I introduced John Berger's view published in his book Another Way of Telling.



Conclusion

The curriculum reform of the BA (Hons) in Design programme not only gives the teaching team a chance to improve the programme but also to revisit the long history of the western mode of teaching and learning design in the Asian region. The teaching and learning of western design concept -- in this case visual representation (the ways meanings are constructed and conveyed through images and objects) in a Hong Kong design school dominated by Chinese students, must be carefully handled for the subject of representation is highly culturally informed. An open platform must be provided for the students to think and rethink the kind of adaptation needed when two cultures collide (instead of meet). Hence, there are opportunities for them to revisit the western conventions and stage new ones which they think fit for their own culture.

The long history of humanism in Chinese culture is a vast resource to inform the humanistic-based design approach. There are a lot of references for the teaching team of the school to draw on for the newly reformed curriculum. In the daily practice of teaching, experiments within contexts are subject to fine tuning in order to strive for a right balance among the professional practice of contemporary design, the historical and cultural development of design locally and in the region and the future needs of the profession.

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