

Positions *Through* Essaying

INTRODUCTION

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Throughout this term, I've explored the relationship between designer, viewer, subject and the process of making meaning. In doing so, I've begun a journey to investigate how we see, engage and interpret the world around us.

The process has largely been an exercise on asking questions through my work. Questions to myself. Questions to you, the viewer. Questions about the subjects we engage with. Questions about intent. Questions about interpretation. Questions about clarity and ambiguity.

How do we interpret the world? How do we make sense of material information? How do we make connections between the things that we see? Do we see things for what they are? Do we all see in the same way? What influences the ways in which we see?

I know. That's a lot of questions. And it is also not the last of them. I should preface the rest of this essay by saying that; this, to a great degree, is an essay made up of questions.

Where have these questions led me? What methods have I used to ask these questions? What is my emerging position? And, what is the purpose of this investigation?

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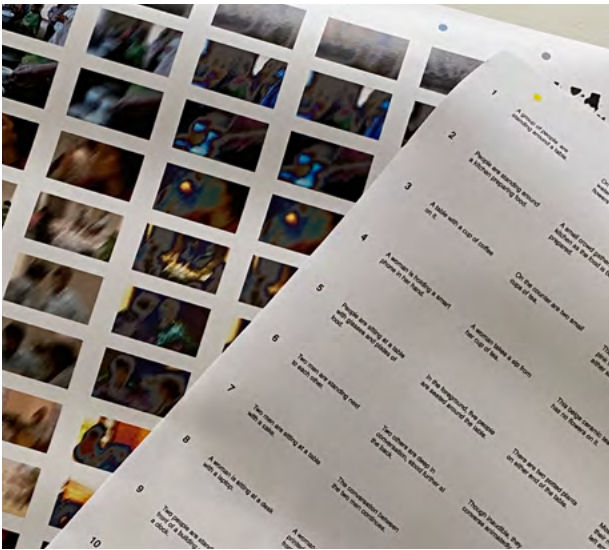
With my 120 iterations, I extracted 20 stills from found footage to manipulate, obscure and shape meaning through authoritative captioning. I experimented with varying levels of diminished visual legibility and textual reliability to guide the way an image is understood.

In doing so, I ponder... What is the relationship between image, text, order and meaning? Can these relationships be challenged? What happens when the legible forms within an image disappear? How much do we rely on captions and annotations to help us read an image? How much control does the author of image and text have over perception? Can text be used to manipulate and shape perception?

Rene Margitte's painting, *La Clef des Songes* (1935) and John Smith's film, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976), both dealing with such concepts, further prompted this line of inquiry:

How can visual and textual material be manipulated? What is the role of an authoritative voice or caption on perceived meaning? What shapes a viewer's perception? How many ways can a subject be represented and perceived? How can a viewer's preconceived expectations be challenged? What is the relationship between maker's intent and viewer's interpretation?

I sorted and compiled my iterations onto a graph. I used this graphic key to order and sequence the individual images into multiple narrative outcomes. There are infinite* ways to shape and interpret a singular set of information. Meaning and perception, I realise, are slippery concepts. A subjective multiplicity.



II. MAKING UP MEANING

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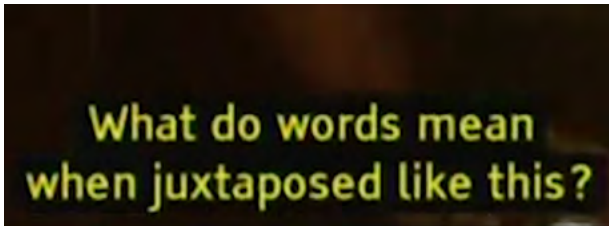
In response to Sentences on Conceptual Art by Sol Lewitt (1968) and Episode 4 of the BBC documentary Ways of Seeing (1972) by John Berger on publicity images - I created three moving image iterations that juxtapose the contents of two.

The interpolation of the two materials resulted in three fractured moving image pieces. Each one combining different elements of each material together: [1] sound and image; [2] sound and text; [3] Image and diminished sound.

Initially I asked myself: how do our brains process images, text and sound together? What meanings do we make when we are faced with lots of information? How does the interpretation of each iteration vary from one another?

In the process of enmeshing the two separate references, I also notice the instinct to draw direct connections between material that is juxtaposed together. In certain parts the connection between the two references are clear. And in certain parts the meaning of the contents diverge. However, the fluctuations between convergence and divergence encourages us to spend more time decoding the relationships between the two.

Can this fluctuation create room for new ideas, concepts and connections? Do these connections exist already? Does this exercise hold the potential for us to form new connections? Make up new meanings? Does the fragmented nature force the viewer to look more closely? Does the difficulty encourage us to spend more time on the things we see?



III. INTENT. EXPECTATION. AMBIGUITY.

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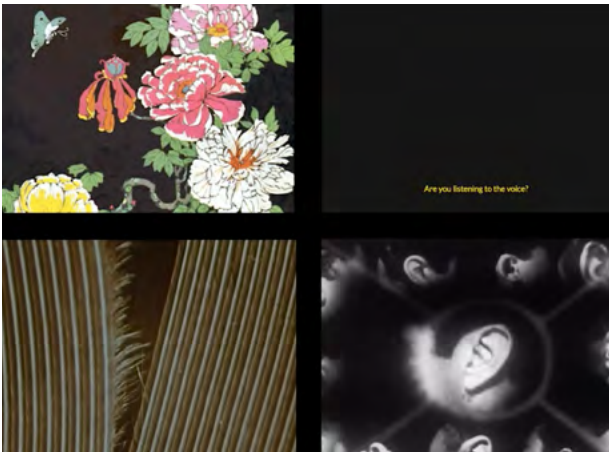
While exploring how fragmentation, confusion and ambiguity intercut with brief moments of clarity can encourage a viewer to carefully look, interpret and draw new connections between different source materials, I began to wonder... What is the purpose of ambiguity in communication design practice? Especially when we are conditioned to believe that efficient communications should be understood with immediacy.

If the purpose of clarity is to represent the way things are. Can ambiguity encourage us to fill in the blanks? Encourage us to imagine the way things might be? The way things could be?

In response to these thoughts, I made a moving image piece titled 'An Exercise on Seeing'. Here I combined fragmented pieces of found footage with disjointed voice-over narration. This is accompanied by text-captions that interrogate how we 'see'.

I hoped to find out how different people would ascribe meaning to unrelated materials when they are juxtaposed together. What are the thoughts, concepts and ideas this exercise can trigger? How does intentional ambiguity challenge a viewer's expectations?

In *Death of the Author* (1977), Roland Barthes argues to emancipate the meaning of a text from the imposition of an all powerful authoritative figure. He claims that the meanings of a text are constructed by a reader very much situated within a wider cultural context (ibid.). In contrast to this, Michael Rock in *Fuck Content* (2013), suggests that the Designer - Author has profound impact on meaning through the act of shaping.



IV. CYCLES OF INTERPRETATION

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So, where does the burden of meaning lie? The author? A viewer? Does intent always align with interpretation? Is there a singular 'correct' meaning? Are meanings multiple? Perhaps a better question might be... What do you make of the things you perceive (or misperceive) regardless of what is 'correct'? What is the value of misinterpretation?

In exploring the dynamic between maker, viewer and meaning, I was particularly fascinated by Sol Lewitt's reflections on this dynamic in *Sentences on Conceptual Art* (1968). He says:

"21 — Perception of ideas leads to new ideas.

23 — One artist may mis-perceive (understand it differently than the artist) a work of art but still be set off in his own chain of thought by that misconstrual.

24 — Perception is subjective".

Maybe this brings us closer to a more fluid, cyclical understanding of the maker-viewer-meaning dynamic. A maker is a viewer. And a viewer is a maker. And we are all seeing, interpreting, making and acting on meaning. And meaning is subjective.

In response to this, I collected responses and interpretations to *An Exercise on Seeing*. These responses influenced a subsequent version of the moving-image piece. I also used the interpretive responses I received to create prompt cards. Can these prompts influence a new viewer's perception? Do they prompt a viewer to see through the lens of another?



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So now you might be wondering. What is my position? Have these exercises on seeing lead me to a defined position?

I'm not sure I've arrived at a defined position, if I'm honest. But isn't that how it is supposed to be? Not everything can be elegantly wrapped up in a tidy bow. I've discovered that everything that makes up the act of seeing, interpreting, imagining and making meaning is complex, multifaceted, difficult, and as Sarah Ahmed would say, 'sweaty' (2017). Difficult concepts require time and labour. The labour of looking. The labour of consideration. The labour of shaping and interpreting.

Perhaps the pursuit of total efficiency, simplified clarity and immediacy isn't always the best approach when it comes to making sense of material information and communicating our complicated positioned perspectives.

'Taking something with value and substance and coring it out so that it can be swallowed without chewing ... is not the solution to our most frightening problems – rather this is one of our most frightening problems.' (Bratton, 2013)

Somethings, I realise, require friction and fragmentation. If we as communication practitioners reveal this friction more often. And as viewers encounter this friction more often. We might see to better understand the way things are. We might see to imagine the way things could be. Rather than seeing to understand as quickly, simply and easily as possible.

We need to exercise how we interpret the things we encounter and subsequently act in the spaces we occupy. Engage with difficult things. Try to perceive and misperceive. Sit with the thoughts and imaginations born out of our (mis)perceptions.

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