[re]think

[ethno] graphic design

design for people

[ethno]graphic design

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It's a Huge World After All

My first abstract for [ethno]graphic design read more like a doomsday report. The abstract spoke of the immense power of visual communication and the ethical role of a graphic designer in this increasingly interconnected world. I sent out a call to arms for designers to act as cultural ambassadors and become mediators between differing factions. In my newly reformed world view, I suddenly realized that everything I designed had implications, and that someone, somewhere on this planet could be maimed by something my mouse and I did. With this in mind I proposed a solution: 'Designers need to become anthropologists.'

Somewhere close to the peak of my ethical mountaintop I started to see more clearly. I began to realize that the aim of being culturally critical of your own work doesn't have to be a moral crusade for the betterment of mankind. What is needed is a broader shift in perspective — one that acknowledges both the complexities of visual communication and the complexities of the people using it. [ethno]graphic design is about designing effectively, as if one were an anthropologist — studying the multitude of ways in which humans use visual information to communicate with one another. Perhaps designers do not need to become anthropologists, but it may help to think like one.

[ethno]graphic design is an ever-evolving approach to graphic design which utilizes anthropological methods in the creative process. This approach, outlined over the following pages, was the result of two years of research, creative exploration and an openness to change.

Of mouse and men

A change in how we think about design requires knowing where it has come from. Graphic design is wed to modernist thought. The International style aimed to create a universal objective visual design. Modernist design is exemplified by the philosophy of Charles Eames, "to make the best for the most for the least." Today, while many understand the importance of appealing to a "target audience," rather than having mass appeal, an [ethno]graphic approach to design takes cultural awareness beyond demographics. Methodologies based on "target audience" or focus group appeal, assume that within the specific demographic segment, there exists a number of homogenous individuals. [ethno]graphic design recognizes that internal variation demands more than a base understanding of a demographic statistic, and that the lives, values, beliefs, and identities of individuals are constantly shaped (and shifting) based on their interaction with a visual landscape. What are the implications of this for the design process? To be culturally aware does not mean to compartmentalize stereotypical cultural variances, but more importantly, to acknowledge the role of the designer in the creation of cultural production.

Whether or not we realize it, designers are constantly absorbing culturally constructed modes of communication, which we then reconstruct and resubmit to the visual landscape. In addition to human interaction and body language, it is the cultural symbols and written/verbal languages that anthropologists analyze in an attempt to better understand people. For anthropologists like Claude Levi-Strauss, works of art produced by a culture are invaluable documents that provide 'vital information about a society's beliefs and social organization.'[1] Graphic design, be it in the form of commercial commodity, information design, wayfinding signage, etc., plays a large part in a complex and overlapping web of cultural artifacts that shape the identities of individuals, neighborhoods, subcultures, commercial entities and nations.[2] Through critical analysis of such artifacts, their origin and use, one can gain insight into how people communicate. If an anthropologist studies the various forms of visual communication that a culture uses to better understand that culture, shouldn't designers have the ability to do so as well?

Ethnography is the primary scientific tool used by anthropologists to describe human cultures.[3] In the ethnographic process, anthropologists rely on direct, firsthand observation of daily behavior, including participant observation, where the anthropologist takes part in the day-to-day activities of the people they are studying.[4] [See chart on p. 13] When their "subject" washes the dishes, the anthropologist is there to dry them, directly involving themselves in the lives of their subject.[5] This practice is founded on a belief in experiential learning. It helps the anthropologist understand the embodied nature of everyday lived experience. Without being there to dry the dishes, the anthropologist might not have noticed the subtle differences between these simple routine tasks and their everyday practices. By being involved in others lives one can recognize the elements of significance through which a people construct meaning and belief systems.

[1] Wiseman, Boris N.D. 2000. Introducing Lévi-Strauss and Structural Anthropology, Icon Books p. 102
[2] Foster, Robert J. 2002. Materializing the Nation: Commodities, Consumption and Media in Papua New Guinea, Indiana University Press: pp. 8-10.

[3] The American Heritage® Science Dictionary, 2002, Houghton Mifflin Company.
[4] Kottak, Conrad Phillip.2005 Cultural Anthropology, 11th ed., McGraw-Hill p.48
[5] Linde-Laursen, Anders, 1993. The Nationalization of Trivialities: How Cleaning becomes an Identity Marker in the Encounter of Swedes and Danes. In: Ulf Hannerz & Ovar Löfgren (eds.): Defining the National. Ethnos 1993 (3-4): 275-293

Through identifying, comparing, and explaining social and cultural systems, anthropologists hope to gain a better understanding of human nature. Whether studying the use of masks in West African rites of passage or the ways in which airport signage has become the modern global hieroglyphic, identifying how we communicate with each other and our visual environments is paramount to understanding who we are.

There has been an increasing trend in the last 20 years for anthropologists to look at their own culture, through the practice of "indigenous ethnography"[6] — even to the point of turning their gaze inward on themselves as individuals. This move towards critical introspection has been referred to as reflexivity in anthropology and has effected a paradigm shift within the methodologies of anthropologists. Reflexivity is a movement recognizing the importance of an anthropologist to lay bare the inherent biases that he or she brings to a fieldsite. We take aspects of our culture for granted because they are familiar to us, but we are no less subjugated by the social and political systems in our culture than any "Other" is. It requires viewing
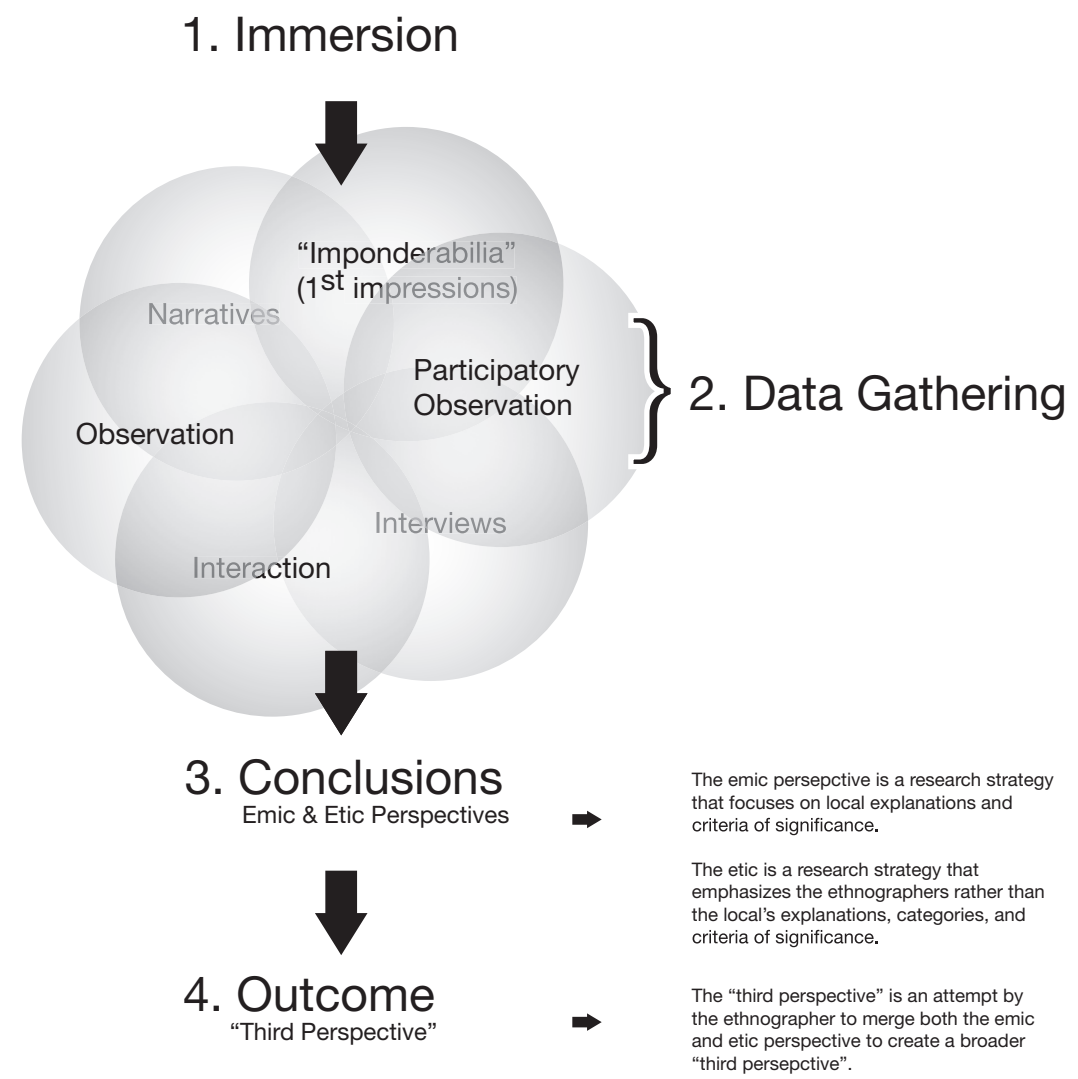
your culture as an outsider to really be aware of the way cultural systems work, and the ways that people communicate with one another. More often than not designers share a great many of cultural similarities with their audience, embedded in the same kinds of cultural processes and contexts.

The process of [ethno]graphic design is first and foremost about understanding. It is through observation, dialogue, and participation that we come to understand. These methods are integrated into the anthropologist's process, which designers can implement and apply to the way they create. Learning how to see, think about, and interact with one's cultural surroundings can and should greatly inform the design process.[7]

The Ethnographic Process

1. Immersion

"Imponderabilia"
(1st impressions)

Narratives

Participatory
Observation

} 2. Data Gathering

Observation

Interviews

Interaction

3. Conclusions
Emic & Etic Perspectives

The emic persepctive is a research strategy that focuses on local explanations and criteria of significance.

The etic is a research strategy that emphasizes the ethnographers rather than the local's explanations, categories, and criteria of significance.

4. Outcome
"Third Perspective"

The "third perspective" is an attempt by the ethnographer to merge both the emic and etic perspective to create a broader "third persepctive".

[6] Clifford, James and Marcus, George.1986. Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, University of California Press. p. 9

[7] Plowman, Tim, 2003. Ethnography and Critical Design Practice, In: Laurel, Brenda (ed): Design Research, MIT Press, pp. 30-38.

Ethnographic Field Techniques:

1. Direct, firsthand observation of daily behavior, including participant observation.

2. Conversation with varying degrees of formality, from the daily chitchat to formal printed interview schedules or questionnaires.

3. Detailed work with key consultants about particular areas of community life.

4. In-depth interviewing, often leading to the collection of life stories of particular people (narrators).

5. Discovery of local beliefs and perceptions which may be compared with the ethnographer's own observations and conclusions.

6. Problem-oriented, Long-term Research, and/or Team research— coordinated research by multiple ethnographers.

7. Large-scale approaches that recognize the complexity of modern life.

—Conrad Phillip Kottak, Cultural Anthropology, 11th ed.

Seeing

In his seminal book, "Ways of Seeing," John Berger writes, "We only see what we look at."[8] This may seem like an incredibly simple phrase and many designers would argue that they already think and act in accordance to Berger's statement. But to really see we must acknowledge that seeing is more than an involuntary function of the brain — that cultural norms, values and beliefs are embedded in all that we perceive and all that we create. Berger continues with another incredibly simple statement that rings true: "To look is an act of choice."[9] We must choose to be conscious of our visual landscapes and how people interact with them and in them. Designers must become observant of the existing forms of visual communication that we encounter in our communities and critically think about who the producers and receivers are.

People are constantly sending, receiving, and making meaning in various kinds of media. A relatively new sub-field of semiotics, called social semiotics, actively examines *how* people use multimodal media to create meaning within various cultural contexts. The emphasis is on *how* people use media, rather than that of traditional semiotics, which places the emphasis on the signs themselves. Noted social semiotician, Theo van Leeuwen states, "the focus [has] changed from the 'sign' to the way people use semiotic 'resources' both to produce communicative artefacts [sic] and events and to interpret them…in the context of specific social situations and practices."[10] By examining the ways that visual communication — products of designers and other media-makers — creates meaning,

designers can see the larger cultural structures that they are building. But firstly, designers must "choose" to *see*, and this is developed though a technique called participant observation.

Anthropologists regard participant observation as the "hallmark of ethnographic fieldwork."[11] Participant observation is a technique of learning and experiencing a people's culture through active social participation and reflexive personal observation. Often this includes interviews and discussion with individuals, but most importantly it requires a direct involvement in the subject's lives. Participant observation is something that we usually do unknowingly, but becoming more critically aware of our cultural surroundings is crucial to be able to truly "see" our environments.

In a hypothetical scenario, a designer is asked to create a poster for the Metropolitan Opera. What would an observant designer do? Rather than acting as a passive member of the audience, the [ethno] graphic designer would actively engage in the experience. To do this the designer would begin by re-questioning the ordinary. What day of the week is it? What opera is being performed? Who is attending the opera? Are they young or old? Why are they there? Describe the physical space of the theater. Talk with the musicians and opera-goers, converse with neighbors. You don't have to find out their life story, but normal banter, if critically analyzed, can lead to a heightened awareness of things once regarded as banal.

Photo by Antonio Zirión

[8] Berger, John. 1976. Ways of Seeing, Penguin; Reprint edition (December 1, 1990), p. 8
[9] Ibid.
[10]Van Leeuwen, Theo. 2005, Introducing Social Semiotics. New York Taylor & Francis Routledge, p. xi

[11]Haviland, et all. 2008. Cultural Anthropology: The Human Challenge. Wadsworth/Thomson Learning p. 9

Thinking

Once these questions are raised and contextualized, new discoveries will inevitably be unearthed that normally would have gone unnoticed or completely disregarded. When I presented this scenario to a colleague, she stated that she was surprised by the number of baseball caps worn by the audience while attending a performance at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. This might suggest to the observant designer that, one, the opera is becoming less of a formal affair, or two, that a younger audience is embracing the opera. Either way, such an observation would not be possible without having been there.

A key way to apply the data, or observations, gathered from the field is to re-conceive the notion of the "designer as expert." The designer will inevitably be an expert in the creation of form (and of course the technical side of this as well), but it is also important to realize that the spectrum of knowledge necessary to create successful design is broad. There are an infinite number of sub-cultures using unique vernacular forms of visual communication. As Katherine McCoy states in her article *Designing in a Multicultural World,* "specialized audiences possess specialized knowledge not shared by others…We cannot count on univalent and monotone mass communications methods to answer the needs of many graphic design problems."[12] It is necessary for designers to acknowledge the needs of both the design problem and the audience. The work of an [ethno]graphic designer is culturally compatible and flexible. It responds to locally perceived modes of communication with the input of community members and harnesses traditional organizations and knowledge.

Designers must learn to challenge the basic human assumption, that "What I think and the way I think is normal."[13] This concept, called naïve realism, is the belief that the way one experiences the world mirrors a "universal" reality. The "real" reality of the matter is that individuals all experience their world in different ways, molded by innumerable factors — one's environment, culture, economic background, etc. As designer Melody Roberts states, "To understand someone else, one must learn first what they think what they do and why."[14] Adopting this thought process enables designers to think and communicate with an audience in effective and innovative ways.

One critical issue in the process of [ethno]graphic design is dealing with borders. Borders are the barriers the designer faces when interacting with the audience (or community), and the barriers that the audience (or community) places around itself. It is not easy to move beyond one's comfort zone, but it is often necessary. Human interaction is at times quite complicated, and crossing borders is most easily done through the aid of neighborhood/community groups, or other 'insiders' that help the process along. "Key informants", (a name often used by anthropologists) are the people that you may already know who can give you insight into how a community works. When there are no informants to be had, a designer can always sit on a park bench and observe, smile, and say 'hello', and they will have just applied the simplest form of ethnography.

Photo by Antonio Zirión

[12]McCoy, Katherine. 1995 "Designing in a Multicultural World," How Magazine

[13]Roberts, Melody. 2002. Border crossing: the role of design research in international product development. LOOP: AIGA Journal of Interaction Design Education. 6 December.
[14]ibid

Making

By creating a dialogue with community members and involving them in the creative phase of the design process, a designer is able to respond to the needs of the problem and the audience. This method, called 'participatory design,' has been championed by designer/anthropologist, Elizabeth B.-N. Sanders. Sanders states, "Participatory designers… respect the expertise of the people and view them as co-creators in the process."[15] Sanders supplies what she calls 'generative toolkits' to everyday people (which might include cameras, workbooks, collage and cognitive mapping tools) to inform and inspire the design development process. She works directly with the people she designs for, allowing them to express themselves visually and verbally. Through co-creation and participatory design, the voice of the audience emerges. Anthropologists call this a polyphonous, or multivocal approach, applied as a means of creating perspectival relativity. Giving voice to your audience levels the playing field by equalizing the relationship between subject and object, between "he who represents, and she who is represented"[16]

These methods demonstrate the power of understanding your community/audience. Ignoring your audience can often yield disastrous results. In Beirut, Lebanon, 2004, a marketing firm for Calvin Klein created billboard advertisements they deemed "risqué and provocative". The vast majority of the audience who encountered the billboards deemed them to be incredibly insensitive. The advertisements depicted scantily-clad men and women, which ignored religious beliefs and cultural taboos of the region. So deeply offended were the members of the commu-

nity, that they "found no way to censor this campaign but to paste, hand-made, hand-rendered calligraphy over the 'obscene' parts and offending visuals."[17] Designers must pose the question, "What is the desired response to the message I am creating?" Provoking or challenging an audience is often the goal, but a designer must make every effort to ellicit the *intended* response. Interacting with the audience during the creative process, be it through dialogue or co-creation, helps the designer achieve that goal.

At the design firm IDEO, the designers host what they call "Unfocus Groups", in order to bring a deliberately broad range of user types to share relevant objects, products, stories or experiences. These sessions, which are held at the initial stages of the design process rather than at final production, give everyday individuals an opportunity to share their individual perspectives and collaborate on rough prototypes, creating an invaluable research and creative experiences for the designers. In addition to these informal "Unfocus Groups," IDEO employs a number of other methods in their research including observation, participatory design and storytelling. As senior designer at IDEO, Ian Groulx states "Nothing strengthens a design argument more than the ability to connect a solution to its source of inspiration, particularly when a given concept is based on firsthand research with real people doing real things in real spaces."[18]

Making the connection between producer and receiver requires a proactive and flexible approach to the creative process. While the process may change in scale depending on the project, the underlying approach, or way of thinking, remains the same. It all
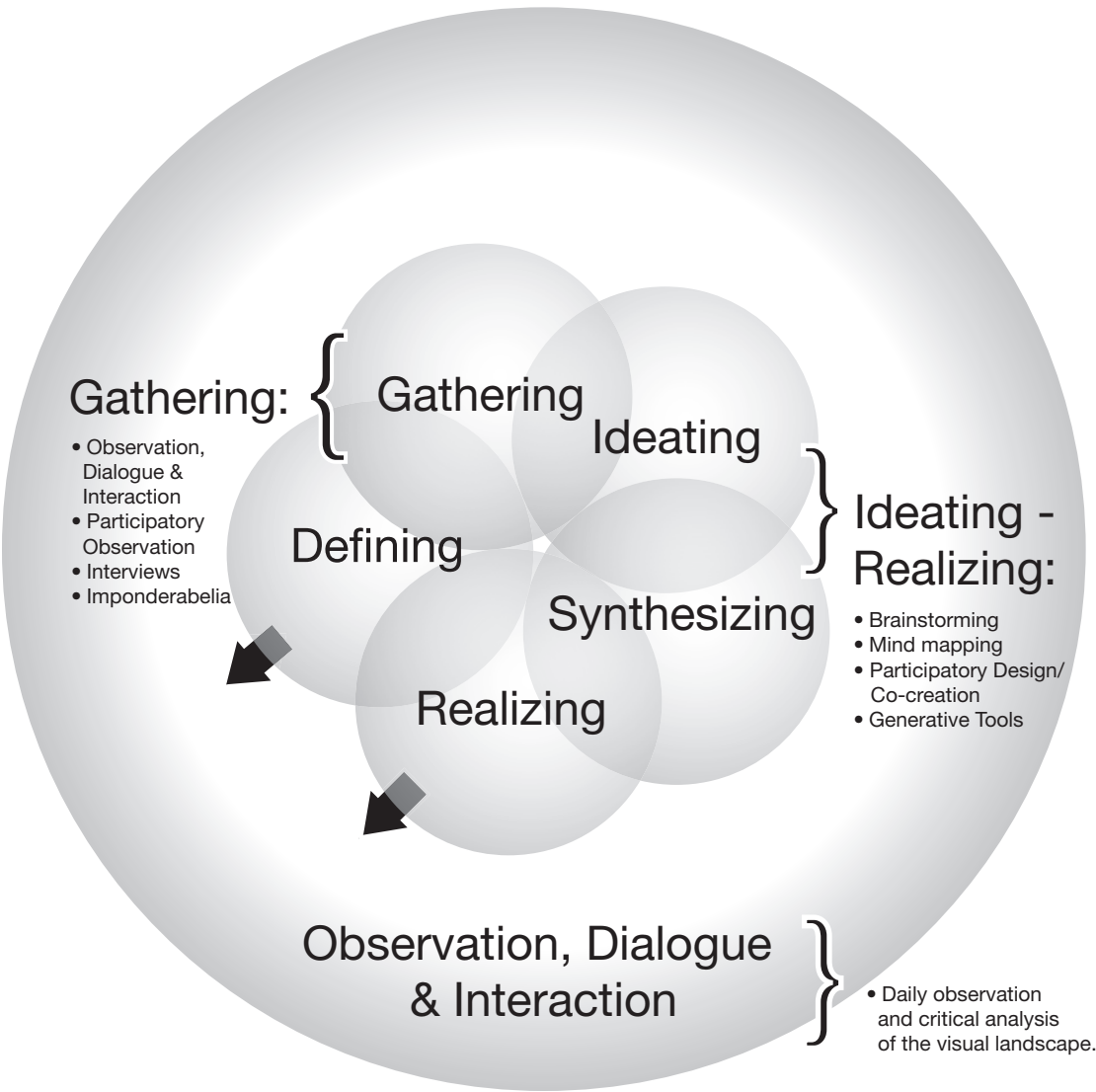
Photo by Antonio Zirión

[15] Sanders, E. B-N. 2006 "Design Research in 2006," Design Research Quarterly 1:1, p.5.
[16]Tyler, Stephen A. 1986. "Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document" Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, University of California Press. p.127

[17] Matta, Nadim. 2005 "The Coastal Highway" Visual Communication 4:2 2005 SAGE Publication
[18] Givechi, Roshi; Groulx,Ian and Woollard, Marc, 2006. "Impact: Inspiring Graphic Design through Human Behaviors" Design Studies: Theory and Research in Graphic Design, Princeton Architectural Press, p. 310

The [ethno]graphic Design Process

Gathering:
- Observation, Dialogue & Interaction
- Participatory Observation
- Interviews
- Imponderabelia

Gathering

Ideating

Defining

Synthesizing

Realizing

Ideating - Realizing:
- Brainstorming
- Mind mapping
- Participatory Design/ Co-creation
- Generative Tools

Observation, Dialogue & Interaction

- Daily observation and critical analysis of the visual landscape.

The work of an 'ethnographic' designer should be culturally compatible, respond to locally perceived modes of communication, harness traditional organizations and knowledge, respond to the input of community members, and be flexible. Flexibility is key, as, obviously, no two design problems are the same.

Observation, dialogue, and interaction are the key techniques the designer will always have at their disposal. The methods of ethnographic design are utilized by people who seek to understand, and by those who seek to be understood. When teamed with critical thinking, reflection, and a bit of 'good design', the designer will have done their part in being a thoughtful and effective visual communicator.

comes back to observation, dialogue and participation—the keys to communication.

As designers gain clear picture of the [ethno]graphic approach to design, two very important and practical questions will inevitably arise: 1) How will I find time for various research techniques, and 2) How will I get my client to understand and pay for the research. Again, there is a spectrum of practical application, and each project must be assessed accordingly. It is up to the designer to decide which techniques of ethnography should be applied, how they will be implemented, and how much time will be spent in the process.

Always consider the scope of the project. Global design problems require global solutions. Designer Melody Roberts states, "At a time when theorists write of "globalization" as a global and local process, businesses can little afford to make assumptions about customers, even in traditional markets."[19] It would be advantageous for a large multinational corporation to conduct large-scale multi-sited ethnography, researching the various ways that many different individuals in different locals use, react, or respond to a product or message. Because the world consists of complex transnational identities and international communities that cannot be defined by borders, designers must think beyond borders. The very idea of culture should not be thought of as a product of a given nation-state and it's inhabitants, but that the lives, values, beliefs, and identities of individuals are constantly shaped (and shifting) by their environment. Large companies must recognize these facts, and it is the role of the designer to apply the appropriate

research methods to effectively communicate to an audience in a complex system.

Local design problems deserve no less of a creative approach to problem solving. Practical constraints (be they of time, money, etc) often become the inspiration for a solution. The designer should objectively analyze the needs and scope of the project, and be realistic with the client when addressing, time, money and value. But one can always rely on two things that will not be affected by the client's pocket book — the designer's ability to be observant and critical. The designer can always find time for research! Observations can take place on the walk to work, during which time the designer can spend reflecting on the visual landscape, noting the actions of morning coffee drinkers, engaging in dialogue with community members or asking a kindergartner their opinion on the public school's signage system. Such approaches can be reduced to the simple act of creative thinking; by seeking new and effective ways to communicate with an audience, new solutions will arise.

[ethno]graphic design is a way of thinking and creating. It acknowledges the role of the designer in the creation of cultural production, and seeks to create dialogue between producer and receiver. [ethno] graphic' design is culturally compatible and flexible. It employs various methods to aid in the design process, primarily participant observation, dialogue and collaborative participation, techniques the designer will always have at their disposal. These methods are utilized by people who seek to understand, and by those who seek to be understood.

[19]Roberts, Melody. 2002. Border crossing: the role of design research in international product development. LOOP: AIGA Journal of Interaction Design Education. 6 December.

[re]think:
a statement
of purpose

Visual communication is a part of everyone's daily existence. It is a ubiquitous mode that shapes not only the environment that individuals inhabit, but the very identity of the individual. Graphic designers, who create the vast majority of the visual communication encountered, play a crucial role in the production of cultural identity. It is a necessity that designers understand that role, as agents of cultural production.

As a student of both design and anthropology, it became apparent to me the ways in which these two fields overlap, and the benefits that can be reaped from cross-disciplinary research and collaboration. During my travels and work abroad, I had a heightened awareness of the unique ways in which visual communication was used in a particular culture, and it prompted me to question my own ways of creating. It made sense to then apply the anthropological methods of observation that I practiced abroad when conducting my own research as a graphic designer. Once I began to really question how anthropological methods could aid the design process, I was provided with a means to see my own work in a broader context and given new tools to create effective visual communication.

This document presents a collection of projects which utilize techniques developed by cultural anthropologists to aid the design process — primarily ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, collaboration, multivocal representation and reflexivity. These projects informed what would become the introductory essay to this book [pp. 8-21].

The document is a reflection on the creative process, and is presented as such. It begins with model influences, which stand as a precedence to my own work [pp. 26-45]. I then look at how my focus shifted from outcome to process, reflection and reevaluation [pp. 46-59]. Further highlighting the developmental stages of research methodology, I have included an essay, *[de]sign language*, which I wrote on vernacular forms of visual communication, in the early stages of this project [pp. 60-71]. I then present the [ethno] graphic studies themselves in detail [pp. 72-131], the application of this approach to design education [pp. 132-143] and conclude with potential directions prompted by this methodology [pp. 144-145].

The studies contained in this document integrate both anthropological and design research methods. They explore these methods in many forms — a polyphonous multi-modal installation on the city of Detroit (*fleshconcret)* [pp. 72-89], a photographic cross-cultural ethnology of visual landscapes from around the world (the Visual Scavenger Hunt) [pp. 90-113], and a collaborative performance/ethnography (*some joy, some pain*) [pp. 114-131]. Each project I attempts to create a dialogue between producer and viewer.

Though simple in structure, through analysis these studies have the ability to become quite complex. By crossing geographic, social and economic borders, all three projects provide insight into the lives of people of varying demographic backgrounds. The videos and photographs are products of unique individuals, and shed light on identity and cognition, and how individual perception is contextualized within a larger culture. The studies encourage the role of designer as "active participant," and push the boundaries of accepted design methodologies. They provide an exceptional collaborative experience, challenge the relationship between the producer and viewer and advocate the use of anthropological methods in the design process.

These studies are not meant to be viewed as an end in themselves, but as inquiries. Conscious of the effects of visual communication as a form of cultural production, this creative project aims to question and provoke, seeking a new approach to creating graphic design.

Standing on Shoulders:
precedents / antecedents

The following pages present only a fraction of the individuals, methodologies, projects and ideas that found their way into both my notebook and my psyche over the course of two years of graduate studies, greatly influencing the research and work on the projects which became [ethno]graphic design.

Regarding the application of anthropological methods to the design process, much has been researched and tested in the fields of product and interaction design, where humans interact directly with a designed object. Human or user-centered design has been championed by both design firms (IDEO, Sapient, Steelcase) and institutions (IIT's Institute of Design, University of Illinois at Chicago, Carnegie Mellon University). The work of Rick Robinson, Elizabeth Tunstall, Tim Plowman and Liz Sanders in the area of human centered design presented ways that such methods have been successfully applied to other design disciplines.

The architects of the emerging field of Social Semiotics [p. 15] also influenced the theoretical nature of my studies, especially in the initial development of projects like the Visual Scavenger Hunt [pp. 88-113] as well as the essay *[de]sign language* [pp. 58-69]. A series of publications by Gunther Kress, Theo Van Leeuwen and Cary Jewitt [bibliography, p. 146] helped define the methods of visual analysis I find essential to critically examining and understanding visual communication. Furthermore, the

authors of several design publications apply similar approaches to visual analysis in their work. Ellen Lupton (*Mixing Messages,* and *Design, Writing, Research* [p. 34]) Lisa Mahar (*American Signs* [p. 33]) and Teal Triggs (*Visual Communication* Journal), have written on the complex role of visual communication as a product of and an influence on cultural identity.

Most importantly, the anthropological theories and methodologies introduced to me over the past two years helped determine the structure and approach of [ethno]graphic design. As an undergraduate, I studied visual anthropological theory and practice. But recently, I have explored the writings of two visual anthropologists, Catherine Russell (*Experimental Ethnography*) and Lucien Taylor (*Visualizing Theory*). Their writings helped place my final film, *some joy, some pain* [pp. 114-131], within a theoretical paradigm.

My secondary advisor, Dr. Anders Linde-Laursen, filled in some of the gaps in my knowledge of contemporary cultural anthropological theory. He introduced me to the writings of George

Marcus, James Clifford and Robert J. Foster. Concepts such as multivocality/polyphony and multi-sited enthography allowed me to see two of my projects in a new light, *fleshconcret* [pp. 72-89] and the Visual Scavenger Hunt [pp. 90-113]. Their writings broadened my understanding of contemporary anthropology and significantly strengthened my argument for a cross-disciplinary approach to graphic design.

While the aforementioned writers provided me with the ability to define my work within a larger theoretical discourse — the books, films and studies referenced on the following pages influenced the process, structure and content to this creative project. Some (such as *Crossing the BLVD* [p. 32], TyPoCiTy [p. 39] and the films *Untitled (for Marilyn)* [p. 40] and *Gambling, Gods and LSD* [p. 43]) provided exciting comparative creative models. Others (such as the selection of books [pp. 34-37], ON/OFF [p. 38] and the films *Forest of Bliss* [p. 42] and *Día de Los Muertos* [p. 41], helped me define the boundaries of what I was doing and what others had done before. These precedents were a necessity, without which this work would be significantly undernourished.

Crossing the BLVD
Warren Lehrer & Judith Sloan

American Signs: Form & Meaning on Route 66
Lisa Mahar

Crossing the BLVD is a multi-modal project that portrays the lives of immigrants and refugees who live the in the most ethnically diverse locality in the United States — the borough of Queens, New York. Warren Lehrer and Judith Sloan spent three years documenting the borough through images, sounds and interviews collected by the artists. The voices, images and sounds collected are "a portrait of a paradoxical and ever-shifting America".

Sloan meticulously recorded and transcribed hundreds of interviews, Lehrer intimately photographed the individuals and their environs, and gave their words life through his typography. The accompanying audio CD is a postmodern mash-up of the interviews, music and field recordings collected by the duo. The project is a true multivocal collaboration, not just between Sloan and Lehrer, but with the entire borough of Queens. Inspiring on many levels.

American Signs presents the vernacular traditions of road-side motel sign making, from the 1930s through the 1970s. Mahar systematically analyzed the signs on Route 66 from Chicago to Los Angeles, looking beyond the signs themselves, but the context surrounding the signs. Signs are complex products of visual communicators, acting not only as wayfinding and directional markers, but also cultural, political and economic ones.

Mahar enforces how signs are products of their time, responding to the needs of a community or locale, as well as reinforce the identity of a locale, considering the various levels of comprehension and meaning making. Her rigorously systematic look at the role of visual communication across a broad of cross-section of American history (and landscape) sets an incredible precedence for any analysis of visual landscapes.

Mutations
Rem Koolhaas,
Nadia Tazi, Stefano
Boeri, Hans Ulrich
Obrist, et al

Place
Vasava

1000 Signs
Colors

*Design, Writing,
Research*
Ellen Lupton and
J. Abbot Miller

Afrikan Alphabets
Saki Mafundikwa

Meggs
Rob Carter, Sandy
Wheeler and Libby
Meggs

*The Medium
is the Massage*
Marshall McLuhan
and Quetin Fiore

*Hazawi Al Heen
(Stories of Now)*
Halim Choueiry, Peter
Martin and VCUQ
design students

Mutations	Place	1000 Signs	Design, Writing, Research	Afrikan Alphabets	Meggs	The Medium is the Massage	Hazawi Al Heen (Stories of Now)
Rem Koolhaas, Nadia Tazi, Stefano Boeri, Hans Ulrich Obrist, et al.	Vasava	Colors	Ellen Lupton and J. Abbot Miller	Saki Mafundikwa	Rob Carter, Sandy Wheeler and Libby Meggs	Marshall McLuhan and Quetin Fiore	Halim Choueiry, Peter Martin and VCUQ design Students

Mutations presents a collection of studies, essays, documentaries and photo-essays on the accelerated pace of urbanization in the world. *Mutations'* scope is all-encompassing, covering the transformation of urban ares through globalization, commerce, information, communication and consumption.

For 18 months a book of 350 blank pages, a video camera, and a T-shirt traveled the world in search of creative diversity, landing on the doorsteps of 35 graphic artists. Each artist that contributed to *Place* was asked to think about their context: to look, see, discover, and depict their vision of the world around them. Initiated by the graphic design firm, Vasava, the project started with one simple question, "To what degree does the place in which an individual lives influence one's creative process?" Vasava sent two packages from their offices in Barcelona, simultaneously travelling East and West. *Place* is a rich cartography of visual landscapes filtered through creative individuals.

1000 Signs is a thorough international collection of visual communication and "standardized" signage. The reader quickly realizes that the "standardization" of signs doesn't truly exist, cultures hybridize and subjugate the original forms into interesting manifestations of local visual languages and products of unique individuals.

Design, Writing Research is a diverse collection of essays on graphic design and typography. Lupton and Miller cover the gamut of visual communication — from the history of punctuation and the origins of international pictograms to the structure of modern typography and the role of design.

African alphabets have a rich cultural and artistic history, which have been long overlooked, disregarded, even suppressed and destroyed. *Afrikan Alphabets* uncovers some of the continents buried typographic history. Mafundikwa spent over 20 years researching the multitude of alphabets, tracing their journeys across the Afrikan continent and within African diaspora.

Meggs presents the prolific and inspiring work of graphic designer, professor, historian, and author Philip Baxter Meggs. The essays contained in this collection introduce his critical writings to audiences (such as myself) that had been previously unable to access the works. The importance of these writings as a critical examination of visual communication should not be overlooked. *Meggs* provides designers with new ways to think and contextualize their work within the history of graphic design.

The Medium is the Massage is Marshall McLuhan's most condensed and visually arresting presentation of his ideas. McLuhan and co-author and designer Quentin Fiore combine type and image to illustrate McLuhan's ideas about "the nature of media, the increasing speed of communication, and the technological basis for our understanding of who we are." An important and compelling read for anyone interested in the role of visual communication in a dynamic and complex world.

Stories of Now is a book co-produced by sixteen VCU Qatar graphic design students. The second in a series of three books on the past, present, and future of Qatar, *Stories of Now,* is about the lives of everyday Qatari people, who live in one of the fastest changing cities in the world. Encouraged by their professors, the students tackle complex subject matter with wit and thoughtfulness.

ON/OFF
Jay Melican

TyPoCiTy
Kurnal Rawat

ON/OFF was a project headed by product designer, Jay Melican, which explored and documented the social aspects of the use of communication technologies. The research team produced a short, multi-sited ethnographic film that explored ways that mobile communication technologies are affecting people's lives — changing both public and private behavior and affecting interpersonal relationships.

Melican rounded up a team of designers, ethnographic researchers and documentary filmmakers who traveled between Chicago, London, England, Recife, Brazil, and Shanghai, China over the course of 1 year. In each city, the researchers immersed themselves in the lives of a family, recording their stories and observing the role of mobile communication in their everyday lives.

TyPoCiTy is a multi-faceted project that documents six decades (from the 1930's until 2000s) of typographic forms in Bombay, India. Specifically focusing on hand-painted restaurant menu boards, Bollywood posters and movie theater signs, handcrafted shop signs, calligraphic taxi number plates and archaic electronic displays, the project acknowledges the role of typography as a cultural signifier.

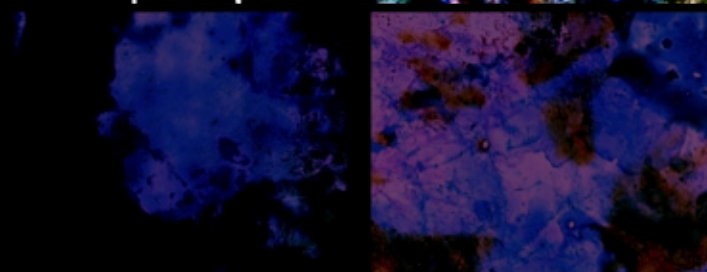Graphic designers, Kurnal Rawat and Vishal Rawley, photographed unique instances of typography in public spaces of Bombay. These typographic specimens were then examined and categorized from "the point of view of graphic design and social significance." TyPoCiTy attempts to generate social consciousness about typographic design and the visual landscape.
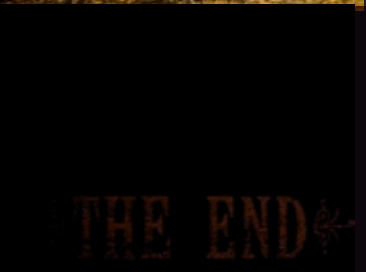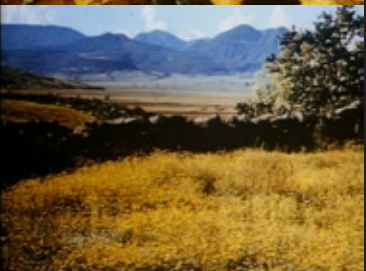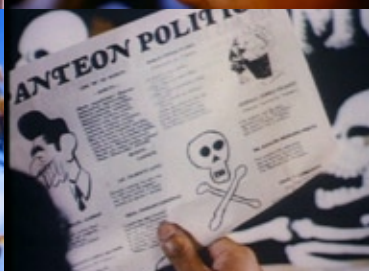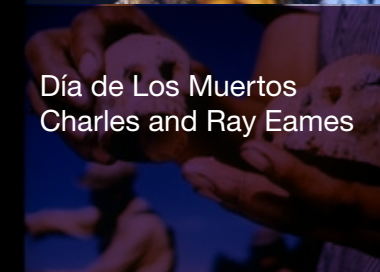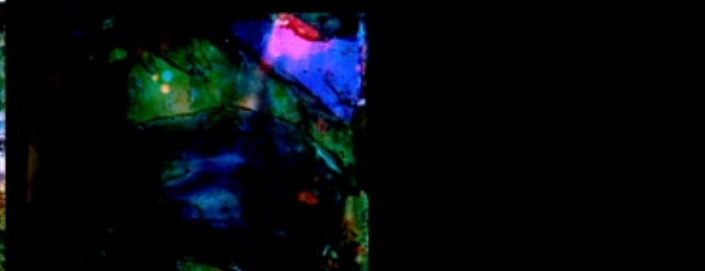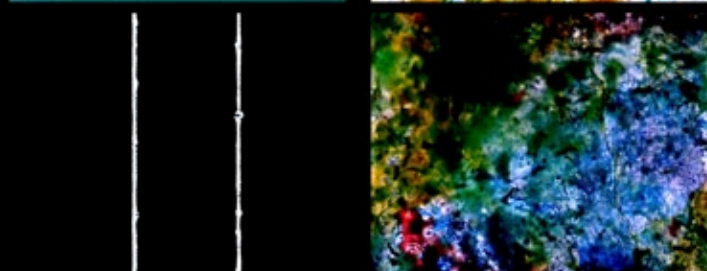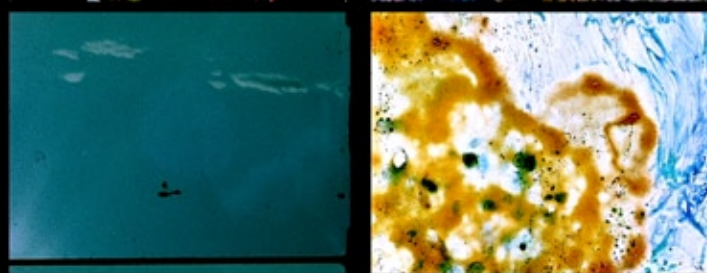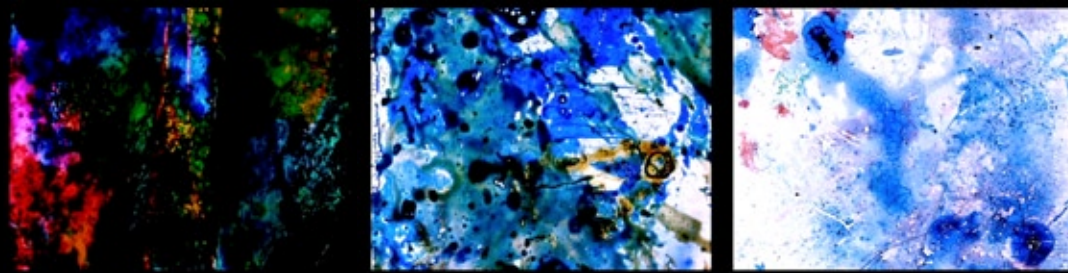
Untitled (for Marilyn)
Stan Brakhage

Día de Los Muertos
Charles and Ray Eames

Forest of Bliss
Robert Gardner

Gambling, Gods & LSD
Peter Mettler

Untitled (for Marilyn)
[p 38]

Stan Brakhage

In almost all these films, there is a celebration of the trivia of daily life, a sense that the commonplace is itself sacred. For me, that's where we really live, that's what we really have. To stop the overwhelming influence of drama in film, I began to concentrate on the glories of an undramatic present, which is literally the tabletop. That is what peripheral vision is most involved with— the so-called mundane, which people use as a word of contempt when they really mean 'earth.' ...If they could only see, only get involved with the wonders right under their noses—more specifically, if they could only see the movie playing on either side of their noses. All they have to do is close their eyes and look.
—Stan Brakhage

Forest of Bliss
[p. 40]

Robert Gardner

Forest of Bliss is a landmark in observational cinema. Shot in Benares, India's most holy city, the film presents life and death along the Ganges River, without subjective narration, subtitles or translated dialogue. As Gardner states, "It is an attempt to give the viewer a wholly authentic, though greatly magnified and concentrated, sense of participation in the experiences examined by the film." It opened the doors for many ethnographic filmmakers, providing new creative and conceptual ways to approach visual anthropology.

Día de Los Muertos
[p. 39]

Charles and Ray Eames

The Eameses' record of Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico, seamlessly mixes beautiful still photography and evocative documentary film to capture the ritual's rich visual heritage. Charles and Ray Eames, ever innovative and social minded, worked with Victor Segovia, anthropologist from the noted Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City, collaborating on what may have been the first marriage of design thinking and anthropological theory in film.

Gambling, Gods & LSD
[p. 41]

Peter Mettler

Gambling, Gods and LSD is a three-hour long filmic meditation on transcendence. Mettler crosses continents, presenting stories from India, Canada, the US and Switzerland which delve into consciousness, religion, thrill-seeking, technology fantasy and destiny. Though the work of an individual, Mettler relies on observation and multivocality allowing the viewer to come to their own conclusions. He marries observational cinema with poetic camera work, and pairs field recording with experimental sonic landscapes, creating what could be thought of as a documentary for the subconscious. Very inspiring.

A Blindfold, a Stick, & a Piñata: *the process & the work*

Prior to graduate school I began to document various forms of culturally specific visual communication encountered while travelling. I had also been interested, for some time, in the overlap between three previous areas of study: design, film and anthropology. But what may seem as a natural extension of my interests, actually arose from "diversions" taken along the way — reflections and reevaluations of my role as a visual communicator.

The following pages present work from the first two semesters of graduate study — focused primarily on the *process* of reaching an outcome, on reflection and reevaluation. In a Fall 2005 experimental film course, I (metaphorically) turned the camera on myself, creating films which challenged me emotionally and creatively [pp. 48-49]. During Spring semester workshop my classmates and I reevaluated the validity of "objective visual design" while simultaneously redefining our design process [pp. 42-43, 46-47]. Additionally, we created the first volume of the periodical *Floyd*, in which we documented a year's worth of our work and graphically defined our approach to the discipline [pp. 52-55]. By constantly examining the creative process, focus was placed not only on outcomes that were attainable, but ultimately ones that were creatively worthwhile.
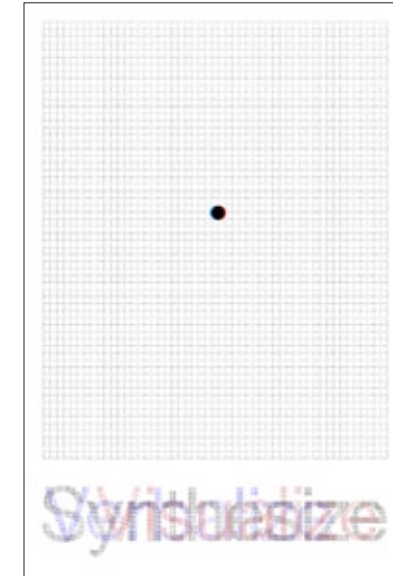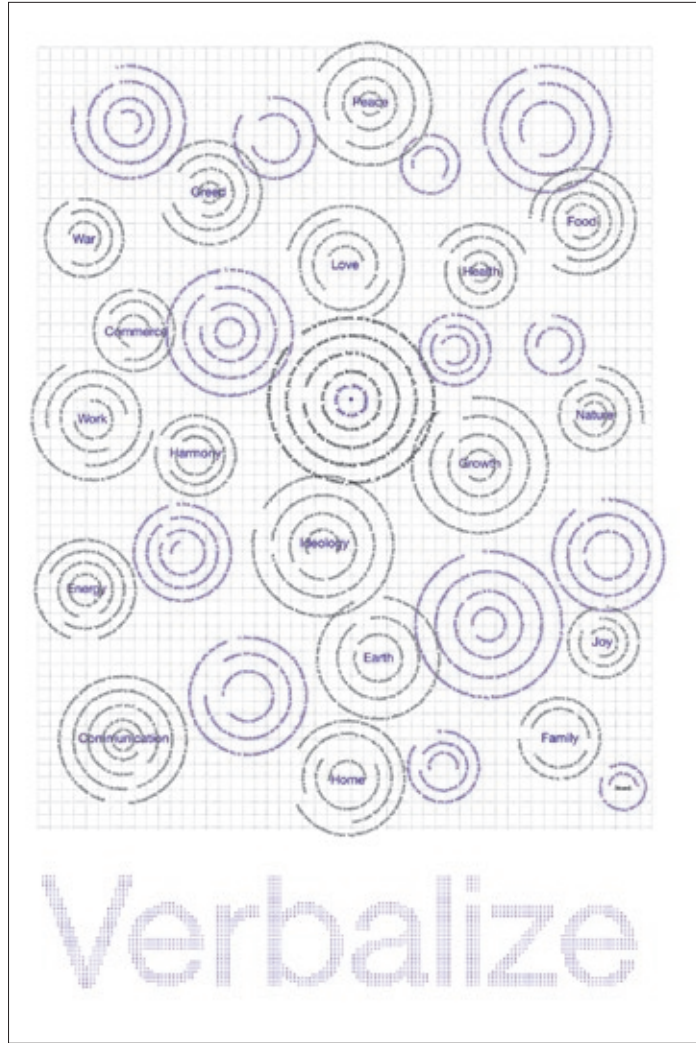
Visualize/Verbalize/Synthesize Posters, 2006, 24" x 36", digital large-format color print.

In a graduate workshop we were asked to reexamine "objective visual design" and whether or not it is still relevant today. Our final project was to represent our design process using the International Style as inspiration. The posters were on display in the Pollak building on VCU's campus from May-September, 2006.

War

Love

Health

Commerce

Work

Harmony

Nature

Growth

Ideology

this is the end zone. all is quiet here. like a dozen monks in here you find out what it is all

relish in this bliss. for it is here that movement ceases true. former action becomes the feast. taste.

you live, you eat, you breathe, you eat, you live, you breathe, you eat, you live, you breathe

why you sleep, why you lost sleep. why you sacrificed so much. breathe

this is (simply) a discipline. discipline. discipline. you breathe

after 3 months of "process" means "after we think about it or not. what is

one great question underlies experience. the greatest

neither social conditioning nor education nor ideology affects this. from th

5. we are at the beginning of a new epoch of human viability.

6. we have "artist" designers, who at their worst satisfy ego, intangibly for social decay and genocide.

7. rarely found is a designer who creates work that satisfies the needs of the

8. this, paired with the narrow that makes up the mass media with

9. by falsifying our skills as

Not Only to See

In fall 2005, I enrolled in an experimental film making course, taught by film and photography professor, Sonali Gulati. The course introduced an incredible roster of inspiring filmmakers, in addition to being presenting new methods for creating film, including experimental processes of hand painted film, scratch animation, hand-processing and developing.

Much of the subject matter for films was generally directed by project guidelines, the most successful of films were self-documentaries — filmic translations of insular thoughts and expressions of identity. In the first exploration, *1/18*, we were to craft a autobiography using a Super8 camera. With the Super8, I reshot home videos that I had previously compiled from family archives one frame at a time. Later the film was hand-processed (as one would with a still photograph), a controlled process which often produces unpredictable results. Much of the emulsion washed off the reel of film, leaving a hauntingly sparse and gritty series of images [p. 50].

I embraced the degraded images, slowing and layer the abstract imagery as the film progresses, evoking the inherent wabi-sabi nature of human memory.

The hand painted study, *Not Killing for Life* [p. 49], was quite inspired by the work of filmmaker, Stan Brakhage [p. 38]. I greatly enjoyed the process of painting directly on clear 16mm film leader, and would duplicate this method for my final thesis project, *some joy, some pain* [pp. 114-131].

In *Only to See* [p. 55], I again explored self documentation and memory, paring abstract imagery with recorded audio journals. I utilized thematic imagery to create mood and to force the viewer to concentrate on the audio, creating a film that was a projection of insular thought.

These films provided a new way for me to develop and create documentary; realizing they could be poetic and emotional without sacrificing clarity.

Film Still from *Only to See*, Digital Video, 2005, 00:04:39
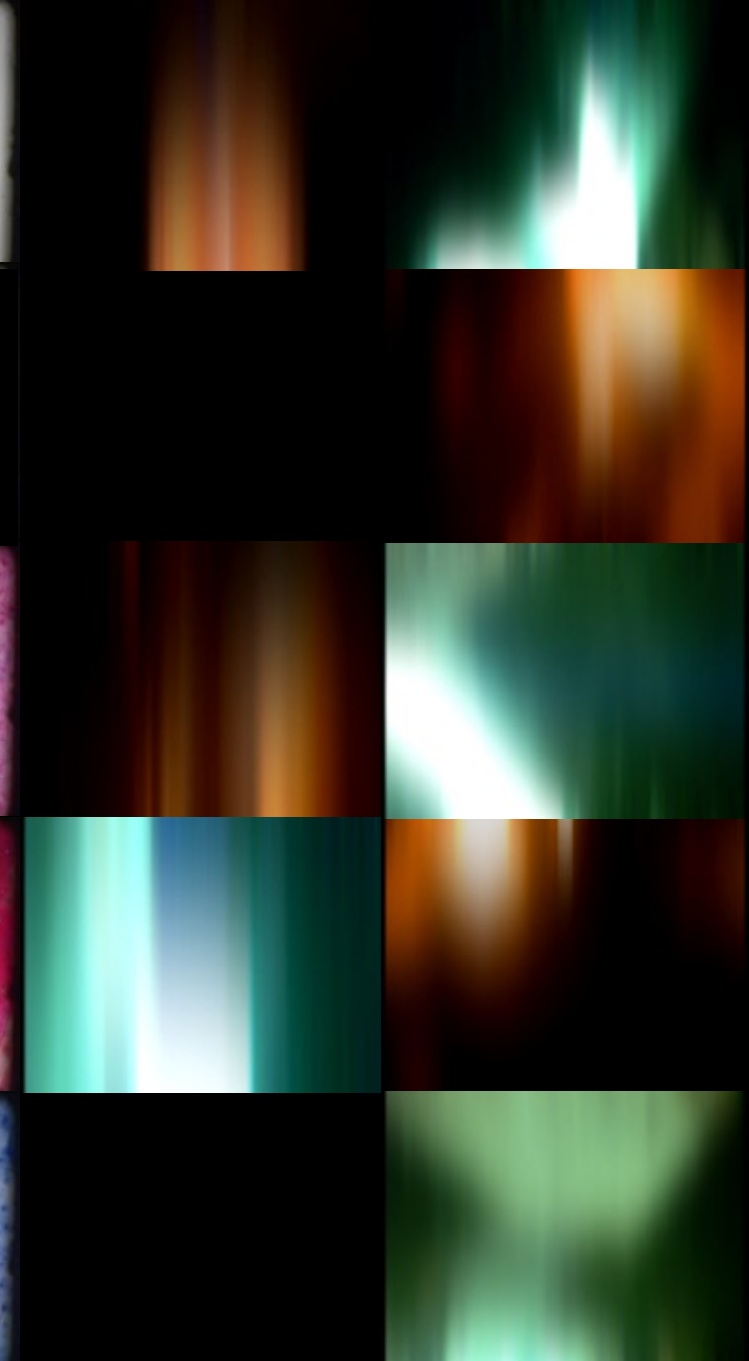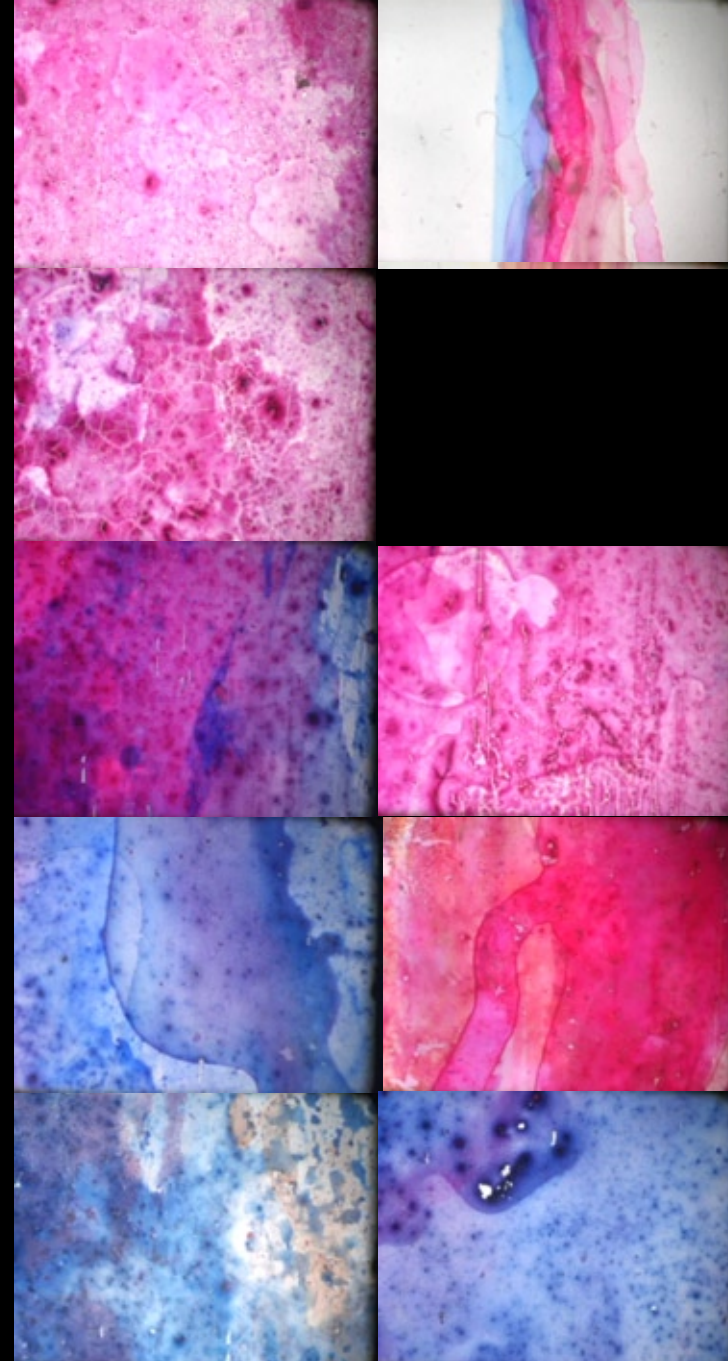
Not Killing
for Life

Only to See
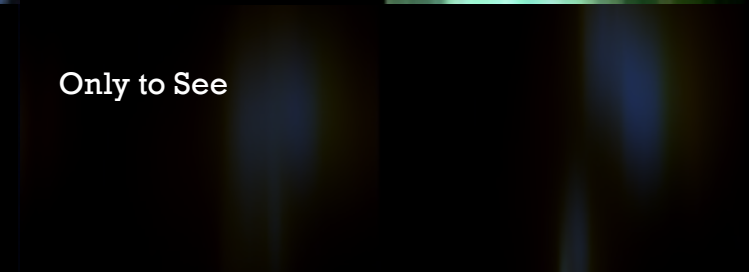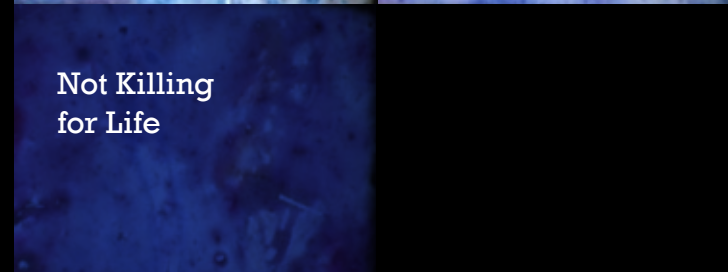
Two spreads from the book *FLOYD 06-07*. Floyd was created to document a year of graduate studies in the Visual Communication/Design program at VCU.

Left: A photographic documentation of projects (of which each column categorizes each project). The corresponding text can be viewed on the following page.

Right: A photographic documentation of 1315 Floyd Ave, studio and classroom space.

A spread from the book *FLOYD 06-07*.
Correspondence and class notes
are categorized by project to give an-
other perspective on the development
of thought process over the course
of the semester.

Photography by
Justin K. Howard

Justin Howard studied and mapped Typographic letterforms of businesses in Richmond as part of his thesis. I found his research in the culturally communicative aspects of typography of particular interest.

His studies eventually led him into the businesses themselves — and to the people who's work and patronage is represented by the typographic forms found upon exterior windows and signs.

[(de)sign language

In a world which communicates in an increasing multitude of modalities, it is necessary for a visual communicator to understand the visual languages that they use to communicate, interact with daily, and most importantly, create themselves. The visual language of mass culture is a complex living entity, growing and mutating as cultures hybridize and reinvent themselves. Within the broader language of mass culture exists vernacular — the language of subcultures.

"The vernacular" was a term adopted by graphic designers in the mid 1980's, to describe a style which appropriated the "untutored and naïve" visual language of commercial artists. Designers wishing to break from the rigid rules of modernism appropriated aesthetic of everyday shop window signage, billboards, restaurant menus and the like. A widespread misuse of the term *vernacular* developed and contributed to an elitist perspective — the "untrained" commercial art as "low" design versus the "high" design of "trained" modernists.

Reinterpreting the term vernacular as simply a dialect removes the narrow constraints imposed by the graphic design "subculture" and develops a better understanding of visual languages encountered daily. Like the dialects of spoken language, a vernacular is not static. It hybridizes into and borrows from other vernaculars to create an identity (e.g. the visual language of the snowboarding subculture borrowed from that of the skateboarding subculture which rose out of the surfing subculture). Certain factors contribute to the dynamic nature of vernaculars, including (but not limited to) the social, economic, ethnic and historical constructs of the subculture.

Understanding Vernacular

By the mid-1980s, the graphic design profession was having an identity crisis of sorts. Many of its practitioners were questioning the modernist ideologies on which the profession had been built, and challenging the boundaries that had been laid by those that came before. Designers began to look outside the institution for inspiration and validation; they looked to what would become known as "the vernacular." "The vernacular" was a term adopted by designers to describe a "natural, unschooled sensibility free from the stylistic self-censorship of modernism." [1] The word became a highly visible and misused term, synonymous with "low" design — naïve, untrained and common — creating an unabashed elitist perspective. This cut a distinct line between what was thought of as "good" design (clean and balanced Modernism) and what Steven Heller termed "the ugly" ('unsophisticated' graphics). [2] Such an approach to understanding "the vernacular" limits how we as graphic designers view all forms of visual communication, and contributes to a kind of "design superiority complex." In linguistic terminology, however, vernacular refers to a dialect spoken by a subculture. It is necessary for designers to approach forms of visual communication from such a perspective — as dialects. As Ellen Lupton states in Mixing Messages, Graphic Design in Contemporary Culture, "vernacular design should be seen not as a realm beneath or outside 'the profession' but as a broad territory whose inhabitants speak a range of local dialects, from the insider codes of skateboard culture to the mass market

hieroglyphics of national brand names."[3] This essay will present an overview of vernacular forms of visual communication; the subcultures of the corporate and underground, the state and street, of commercial art and design subcultures. It will also put forward a methodology for visual analysis, dealing foremost with context and meaning as it relates to cultural studies and visual communication in an attempt to understand vernacular in the broader sense.

When one researches the roots of the word *vernacular,* it becomes apparent how the elitist misnomer developed. In Latin, verna, of which the word vernacular is derivative, translates literally to "a slave born in the master's house," a native.[4] In a historical sense the word 'vernacular' denotes the spoken dialect that is not a community's official language.[5] While the "literate" ruling class in Europe spoke Latin or Greek, prior to the invention of the printing press, language developed primarily through geographic constraints and trade. Vernacular forms of visual communication were products of commerce and culture. As technology changed, commerce and culture changed, consistently informing and reforming how people communicate.

We presently find ourselves immersed in a dynamic technologically driven world in which multimodal communication is a constant reality. Packaged goods in supermarkets, television ads, billboards, internet pop-ups, spam emails and the like are designed to compete for our attention and influence

our decisions. Every form of visual communication encountered carries information that speaks to and from a specific culture. The vast web of cultures and subcultures communicate in languages viewers either understand or don't, and it is the graphic designer who creates the majority of the symbols and styles that make up the language of identity. The following section presents only a small number of subcultures whose identities have been greatly shaped through the visual language projected by each group. Some of the vernaculars are understood and used by many, some have greatly influenced the visual languages of other groups, and some are comprised of many different vernaculars within a broader visual language.

Corporate Culture

One of the broadest vernaculars is that of corporations. The identities of corporations have become a language within themselves—a alphabet of logos and branding styles that consumers encounter daily. The corporate vernacular is a growing language of people and products fueled by the success of big business in today's global economy. Cultures that have been closed off for years from capitalism, whether because of politics, religion, or other reasons are now being swept up into a globalized market where the visual languages of corporations can communicate social status, values and morals, or the lack thereof. Counter cultures have even begun appropriating the vernacular of the corporate world, parodying and communicating a com-

pletely different set of ideals. It could be argued that the corporate vernacular is the language of mass culture, but it is indeed a specific language that not everyone yet speaks.

The Language of the State

Being one of the oldest and constantly changing vernaculars, the visual languages of states were originally used to signify sovereignty and to differentiate warring clans on battlefields. Today governmental institutions across the globe have their own forms of visual communication that are specific to each nation and applied in a multitude of manners — from propaganda and nation building, to warning and public safety images.

The Language of the Street

The vernacular of "the street," is created for and by an infinite number of subcultures. What we encounter daily at pedestrian level — shop windows, posters, restaurant signage, graffiti and the like—become the voices of those who wish to be seen and heard. Ethnic groups, political parties, record companies, store owners, underground media organizations, gangs, activists, and other subcultures use forms of visual communication to project identities and communicate messages. The street is where ideas are shared, goods are traded, marginalized groups are voiced, and people of any disposition can interact with one another. It is not at all surprising that the street is where so many different visual languages can be seen competing for space.

[1] Lupton, Ellen. (qtd. by Barbara Glauber) Lift And Separate (The Herb Lubalin Study Center of Design and Typography, 1993): 5.
[2] Heller, Steven. "The Cult of the Ugly," Eye Magazine No. 9, Vol. 3, 1993.

[3] Lupton, Ellen. Mixing Messages, Graphic Design in Contemporary Culture, (Princeton Architectural Press, 1996): 111.
[4] The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1997.
[5] Lupton, Ellen. Mixing Messages, Graphic Design in Contemporary Culture, (Princeton Architectural Press, 1996): 108.

Above: Restaurant Florent, Tibor Kalman, M&Co.

The Design Subculture

Designers speak their own language and "talk" in specific visual languages. Often the message that the designer attempts to put forth can only be understood by other designers that have been trained to communicate using the same lexicon; there are dictionaries created solely to understand the words and phrases used in the design profession. It can be argued that the first language used by humans was of a visual nature, be it in the form of marks in the sand, cave drawings or sign language; visual communication has always been a part of human interaction. Because of its very nature, graphic design has always left remnants of ideas for future generations to explore. The very roots of the vernacular of graphic design are woven into the present.

Graphic designers such as Tibor Kalman and Charles S. Anderson appropriated the design of the everyday and styles of bygone eras in an attempt to emote a purer, unpretentious form of visual communication as well as to utilize and challenge the ideas already existing in the imagery. M&Co., the firm headed by Kalman, embraced the ready-made aesthetic of objects we encounter on a daily basis, combining visual and typographic puns with commonplace aesthetic. Anderson's work adopted not only the images of the past (mainly those of the 40s and 50s) but also the cultural and moral specifics

alluded to by the imagery. By doing so, Kalman and Anderson created works that were as tongue-in-cheek and unintentionally demeaning as they were fresh and intelligent.

Art Chantry and Ed Fella referenced and directly copied every-day commercial art found in catalogues, sign windows, grocery stores, etc. Art Chantry, a designer-archivist applied the pre-existing languages of commercial art and illustrations without idealizing or "sanitizing them to suit a bland middle-class, supermarket taste."[6] His work can be found on much of the cultural accouterments of Seattle's art scene as well as on the covers of countless independent rock albums. Ed Fella, who graduated from Cranbrook in 1987, after a long and successful career as a designer/illustrator, applied his knowledge of commercial illustration and hand lettering to create hybridized and random DaDa-inspired design. His work reflects not only his affinity for craft, but also his own knowledge and experience as a craftsperson. Though both Fella and Chantry's work was often lumped into what many critics in the 1980's called "the vernacular," the two were appropriating without patronizing, and simultaneously creating functional. They were designing not only for designers but also for an audience outside of design, creating works specific to their audience's visual language.

[6] Poyner, Rick. No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism. (Yale University Press, 2003).

A Method For Visual Analysis

As stated previously, it is necessary for graphic design practitioners to understand that they indeed play a large role in interpreting and developing the visual languages of cultures. Often a designer is asked to create or contribute to a visual identity of a culture or group with which he or she is not familiar. In all such cases designers need to have an understanding of the structure and formation of a vernacular. The examples of visual dialects of specific subcultures presented above can be analyzed to determine content and meaning. Studying the cultural artifacts of cultures and subcultures helps one understand the relationships of cultural production, consumption, belief and meaning.[7] Such knowledge informs the designer as to how a group of people create an identity and how the visual language of an identity is interpreted by those within and outside of the culture or subculture. The following is a suggested methodology for analyzing all forms of visual communication, but is especially suited to the visual study of a vernacular.

Fieldwork

Visual analysis is essentially fieldwork. Fieldwork is firsthand data collecting (as opposed to that done or observed in a controlled environment). It is a method of inquiry in which "one is immersed personally in the ongoing social activities of some individual or group for the purpose of research."[8] This form of research is essential to develop an understanding of how people (or any other organisms) live and communicate with one another. Harry F.

Wolcott states in *The Art of Fieldwork*, "To me, the essence of fieldwork is revealed in the intent behind it, rather than by the label itself."[9] It is significant for the analyst to be conscious of their own intentions and how context informs comprehension.

Context

When analyzing artifacts (forms of visual communication) we must be aware of the context surrounding the analyst, the viewing and the production. Context is that which surrounds and gives meaning to something else. Every artifact has a broader context that exists outside of the frame, informing the object and the viewer.

First, the analyst must define a personal context. What is the analyst's personal history/background/roots? Do these contribute to a bias or enrich the analyst's cultural perspective? Is the analyst within or without of the group he or she is studying? As stated previously one must be conscious of the intentions for analysis.

Secondly, the analyst needs to ask where the image is to determine the context of viewing. The context of viewing influences "how we look at the [artifact] through constructing certain expectations."[10] Where is the artifact? Is it's location in the public or private realm? Can a historical background be determined? Most importantly, what is the artifact's social function? Can we determine its social/cultural/economic context?

[7] Lister, Martin and Wells, Liz. "Seeing Beyond Belief: Cultural Studies as an Approach to Analysing the Visual" in Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (eds.) Handbook of Visual Analysis. (Sage Publications, 2001): 61.
[8] Wolcott, Harry F. The Art of Fieldwork, (AltaMira Press, 1995): 66.

[9] Ibid.
[10] Lister, Martin and Wells, Liz. "Seeing Beyond Belief: Cultural Studies as an Approach to Analysing the Visual" in Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (eds.) Handbook of Visual Analysis. (Sage Publications, 2001): 65.

The last step in understanding the context of an artifact is to look at its production. One must ask, "How did it get there?" Is the production and distribution of the artifact discernible? Do we know who made it, how it was made, and how it was circulated? What are the intentions of the producer? Does such knowledge inform the function and meaning of the artifact?

Form and Meaning
Once the context of the analyst, the viewing and production has been considered, the form and meaning of the artifact is then analyzed. At this time, the analyst interprets the artifact itself, studying the structure and formal characteristics of the sign. The concepts of convention and semiotics are applied at this point of the visual analysis.

A convention is a general/collective agreement on certain practices, customs, attitudes, procedures, etc. They inform how we, as individuals, interpret information. Semiotics, the theory and study of signs, is informed by the specific conventions of a culture. We attempt to find meaning in visual communication by looking at the formal qualities of language and symbols and the relationships between words, signs and symbols, what they represent and how they are interpreted by their users. The language of the artifact, and how we interpret it is steeped in social/cultural and physical conventions. The act of visual analysis is rooted in literature and art history, but the artifact has its own physical

conventions related the medium of construction and the technology behind its design.[11] Often overlooked when analyzing an artifact is its social use, where signification actually takes place.[12]

The process of visual analysis has as much to do with maintaining openness while interpreting the data, as it does being self reflexive and methodological. Being aware of the context of the analyst, the viewing and production, and then allowing this awareness to inform the analysis of the content can only aid the designer in understanding the visual language(s) of the audience.

When postmodern graphic designers of the 1980s and 90s began appropriating culturally specific and historic forms of visual communication they were doing so as a reaction against the constraints of structured modernist design. They were also part of a broader realization that the structure of modernist design (clean, neutral design for the masses) does not necessarily reflect the structure of society. Cultures are constantly changing, hybridizing and reinventing their identities. Within the broader global culture exists countless numbers of subcultures that are similarly changing — creating vernacular forms of visual communication that function as dialect, communicating to a specific audience. It is the designer who shapes these identities and messages, but only an insightful designer recognizes his or her role in this process.

[11] Lister, Martin and Wells, Liz. "Seeing Beyond Belief: Cultural Studies as an Approach to Analysing the Visual" in Van Leuween and Jewitt (eds.) Handbook of Visual Analysis. (Sage Publications, 2001): 71.
[12] Ibid., 73.

The International Calligraphic Style:
Swiss graffiti, Bern, Switzerland
Photo: João Lourenco and
Natalie Roethlin
Inset: Thai tags, Bangkok, Thailand
Photo: Rinda Kanchanakhom

The Detroit Project: *fleshconcret,* 2004-07

Detroit is a false hometown to nearly 5 million people. Though Metro-Detroit boasts an ever-expanding community (of which I claim roots to), the city's true population has dwindled to currently less than half of it's peak of 1.8 million in 1950.

fleshconcret began as a means for a personal understanding of this complex city; a conversation between people and architecture, human movement and urban planning. It ended after many binges of complete immersion in a seemingly endless project; on and off again love affairs with Detroit, and finally culminating in a final four month long study of it's 300 year history, focusing on architecture, immigration, city planning and human response to the psycho-geography of a city, which became a book/appendices to an installation.

The project took on the form of a mixed media installation which combined video, ethnographic audio (interviews/field recordings) with print media, which serves as an appendix to the five channel installation. Each audio channel is the voice of a resident recounting their life and living situations, covering over 70 years of personal narratives in Detroit. The appendix (which unfolds to 7'x10') maps the conversations, paralleling each with the city's history. This installation is the result of a long (4 year) meditation on the city of Detroit.

Five Voices Loudly Sounding

For four years *fleshconcret* was molded into many forms. It's first incarnation was in the form of an 8 channel audio installation/sculpture created for the Critical Mass exhibition at Marygrove college in Detroit, curated by [flak], an arts and architecture group based in Detroit. The exhibition explored "urbanity, environment, and the process of renewal of the city through means of art and architecture".[1] Each of *fleshconcret's* 8 audio channels were housed within the base of a square cinder block, from which cored beams of various heights arose, emitting muffled voices. As one observer wrote, "these wooden posts... rise up from the gallery floor at various angles, like the remains of a sunken wharf. From within their hollowed centers come forth the sounds of people talking, and other noises of a lively city".[2] When one came closer, or cupped an ear, the willing listener heard voices of the city, histories of individuals that experienced Detroit's tumultuous twentieth century, who had lived within it's boundaries and witnessed the most violent metamorphosis of Detroit's history.

In 2004, I thoroughly explored Detroit's vacant city center, interviewing those that would tell their story. Ed, a former Ford factory worker originally from Alabama, now homeless; Ulysses, a triumphantly sardonic (yet optimistic) young artist; and Randy, a Polish-American, born in 1950 in Hamtramck, on hot-rods, white flight and handguns. Additionally, I turned to my family members, recording my grand-

mother Anita, recounting her post war newlywed years, the '43 riots and of her decision to leave, and her daughter, my Aunt Nancy, on her return 20 years later — the horrendous race riot of July '67, Motor City Blues, and a Detroit Renaissance. The diversity of voices is the centerpiece of the installation. A mulit-vocal approach shares authorship, and allows the people of Detroit to represent themselves.

After two more shows (now with video but sans wooden posts), I thought that I would shelve the project, but I was afforded an opportunity to do an independent study with Professor Sandy Wheeler, Summer 2006. I rattled off several ares of interest, but she encouraged me to turn back to Detroit. I quickly realized how much I did not know about my "hometown". I immersed myself in the city's history, from it's first written recordings as an Anishinabe trading ground (before it's French "founding" in 1701), to it's present day fight for survival as it shakes off decades of poor city management, corruption, high property taxes, and false urban renewals.

In the research stage, I amassed a daunting amount of information on Detroit ranging from pre-historic archaeological studies to present day political analysis of Mayor Kilpatrick. Within the wealth of information, I found structure — in the multitudes of perspectives, and the innumerable means of portraying voices from the past. Detroit was complex; and within the complexity was the form.

[1] Sousanis, Nick. The Arts: Reviews, theDetroiter.com, October, 2004 (http://thedetroiter.com/b2evoArt/blogs/index.php?blog=2&m=200410)
[2] Ibid.

Appendix cover (mock up)

heart i,can

?hear
t h/bedowe

bâtiment

waakaaʼigan
/structure

can you

? we
hear

e

voices shouting
ther

in

the

heart/voices?

nushʼka!

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?t

heart

you
can you
hear

distance

a structu

fire

?

megwaa

sound is

fading

it
is more
like
five sounds

th
the moment

in th

e

thedistance,

la pe au, le sang,
le chair

/

out

wiiyaas
thhhth

sound is
really
fading
out now‡

I focused first on the three languages of the city — Ojibwe (or Anishinabe, the original people), the French, and the English (and Americans). The poem, contained within the interior of the appendix, introduces the major themes of the project — individuals, architecture, planning, and the relationship between humans and architecture within the historical context of Detroit. It floats between the three languages (or four, depending on interpretation) [pp. 80-81]. Again, multi-vocality is utilized.

My research was culled primarily from the broadsheets of the era, The Detroit News and Free Press, as well as any other sources I could unearth. The immense amount of words and images became overwhelming at times, but I became challenged by the opportunity to organize this wealth of information. The question arose, however, "How does this relate to the audio?" I began to seek for answers within the maps that I was searching, and found the solution to such a complicated problem contained therein. I could relate the information the individuals recounted during my interviews to the relevant historical information I unearthed in my research.

Essentially I created several maps which overlapped: a map of each individuals conversation [this page and pp. 84-87], a map of the history of Detroit [pp. 84-85], and a loose map of Detroit, based upon the structure original city planner, Augustus B. Woodward. Woodward's planning was a creative fountain of inspiration. His plans, focusing anywhere from 3 to 5 main roads, radiating from a center point of commerce. I found his sketches to be inspirational — my plans for the structure of the book drew directly upon his plans for the city. Though Detroit was limited in growth by a river (and whatever ethnic or economic-related hurdles encountered), it spread outward, and the appendix is built upon this structure. *fleshconcret* slowly becomes unwieldy, both in information and form, until finally it overwhelms the space in size and sound.

Each audio channel, recounting the story of the individual and their relationship to Detroit and it's history builds and releases multiple swells, at some points completely unnoticeable to a bystander, at other points a polyphonous choir of voices and sounds. It is up to the viewer to either engage or consciously ignore the work — a concept not so far removed from the present-day relationship between Detroit and her inhabitants.

48201

1701
/2001

bâtiment

ode'imaa

flesh

concrete

Hills of
Auburn

43/67

313/
248

The unfolded appen-
dix scaled to 10% of
the original size.

43/67

Nancy RL

00:05:00.01 00:10:00.01 00:15:00.01 00:20:00.01 00:25:00.01 00:30:00.01 00:35:00.01 00:40:00.01 00:45:00.01 00:50:00.01 00:55:00.01 01:00:00.01 01:05:00.01 01:10:00.01

The five voices are mapped in the ap-
pendix, linking their words and stories to
the history of Detroit.

A listener/viewer can follow a map of the
dialogue (above) and trace the specific
topic to it's entry in the appendix.

migrated northward.

The influx of newcomers strained not only housing, but transportation,
education and recreational facilities as well. Wartime residents of
Detroit endured long lines everywhere, at bus stops, grocery stores, and
even at newsstands where they hoped for the chance to be first
answering classified ads offering rooms for rent. Even though the city
enjoyed full employment, it suffered the many discomforts of wartime
rationing. Child-care programs were nonexistent, with grandma the only
hope — provided she wasn't already working at a defense plant.

The prevailing 48-hour work week put lots of money into defense
workers pockets, but there were few places to spend it and little to
spend it on. Food and housing were either rationed or unavailable.
Detroit's nickname was the "Arsenal of Democracy" but stressed-out
residents often referred to it as the "arsehole" of democracy. Workers
disgruntled by the long commute out to the Willow Run plane factory
dubbed that operation "Will it Run."

Times were tough for all, but for the Negro community, times were even
tougher.

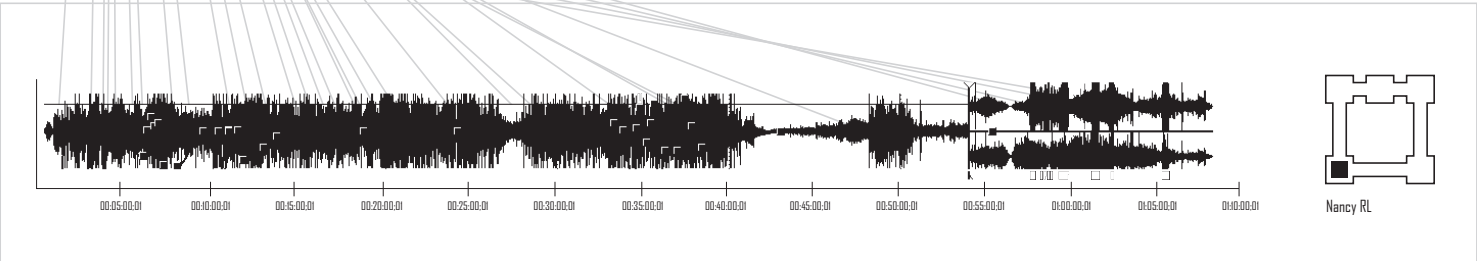Blacks were excluded from all public housing except the Brewster
projects. Many lived in homes without indoor plumbing, yet they paid rent
two to three times higher than families in white districts. Blacks were
also confronted with a segregated military, discrimination in public
accommodations, and unfair treatment by police.

The summer of 1941 saw an epidemic of street corner fights involving
blacks and Polish youths who were terrorizing black neighborhoods in
Detroit and Hamtramck.

Early in June 1943, 25,000 Packard plant workers, who produced
engines for bombers and PT boats, stopped work in protest of the
promotion of three blacks. A handful of agitators whipped up animosity
against the promotions. During the strike a voice outside the plant
reportedly shouted, "I'd rather see Hitler and Hirohito win than work
beside a nigger on the assembly line."

Whites resentful over working next to blacks caused many stoppages
and slowdowns. Harold Zeck, a former Packard defense worker, recalls
the time when a group of women engine workers tried to get the men on
the assembly line to walk off the job to protest black female workers
using the white restrooms. "They think their fannies are as good as
ours," screamed one woman. The protest fizzled when the men refused
to walk out.

Unions did their best to keep production figures up and to keep the lid on
confrontations, even though the Ku Klux Klan and the feared Black Legion
were highly organized and visible in the plants.

Overcrowded housing combined with government rent control further
aggravated racial problems in the city. Once spacious flats were divided
and then subdivided into tiny rooms to rent. Many living under these
oppressive conditions relied on hopes for the future to get them through
the long tiring days.

Even before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the federal government was
concerned about providing housing for the workers who were beginning
to pour into the area. On June 4, 1941, the Detroit Housing Commission
approved two sites for defense housing projects—one for whites, one for
blacks. The site originally selected by the commission for black workers
was in a predominantly black area. But the federal government chose a
site at Nevada and Fenelon streets, a white neighborhood.

The Rev. Horace White, the only black member of the Housing
Commission, stated, "As much as I disagree with the site selection, the
housing shortage in Detroit is so acute, particularly among Negroes, that
I feel we should cooperate."

On Sept. 29, the project was named Sojourner Truth, in memory of the
female Negro leader and poet of Civil War days. Despite being completed
on Dec. 15, no tenants moved into the homes because of mounting
opposition from the white neighborhood.

On Jan. 20, 1942, Washington informed the Housing Commission that the
Sojourner Truth project would be for whites and another site would be
selected for black workers. But when a suitable site for blacks could not
be found, Washington housing authorities agreed to allow blacks into the
finished homes.

On Feb. 27, with a cross burning in a field near the homes, 150 angry
whites picketed the project vowing to keep out any black homeowners.
By dawn the following day, the crowd had grown to 1,200, many of whom
were armed.

The first black tenants, rent paid and leases signed, arrived at 9 a.m. but
left the area fearing trouble. It wasn't long in coming. Fighting began
when two blacks in a car attempted to run through the picket line.
Clashes between white and black groups continued into the afternoon
when 16 mounted police attempted to break up the fighting. Tear gas and
shotgun shell were flying through the air. Officials announced an
indefinite postponement of the move.

soon die here."

Jackson, a short, wiry 130-pound former UAW-CIO shop steward, had
taken an active part in the auto sit-down strikes of 1937.

White neighbors on the project's eastern boundary quizzed each passing
white, "Which side are you on?" A score of white women, some pushing
baby carriages, waved American flags and paraded briefly along Conley
Avenue north of the project. They booed when the Rev. White appeared to
show support for the new neighbors.

Although the Sojourner Truth riots resulted in no fatalities, the trouble
was a warning of what was to come.

An excerpt from "The 1943 Detroit race riots"
(http://info.detnews.com/history/story/index.cfm?id=185&category=e
vents) By Vivian M. Baulch and Patricia Zacharias / The Detroit News

Skums, Industrial Areas,
Proposed Low Cost Housing,
1941

■ Industrial Areas
■ Slum Areas
■ Low Cost Housing Projects

Source: Detroit Housing Commission, Annual Report 1945.

OWI-16547-C

Above: fleshconcret, opening reception at Sonic Landscapes, Scene Metrospace, Lansing Michigan.

Above: Installation view, Sonic Landscapes, Scene Metrospace: Multi-Channel Audio & Print Media, 2004-07, 01:35:21;09

Photo by Antonio Zirión

THE VISUAL SCAVENGER HUNT

The goal of the Visual Scavenger Hunt is to document the different (and often quite similar) visual landscapes encountered daily by people around the world. Often we do not notice how much our communities are shaped by various forms of visual communication. Posters, signs, advertisements, paintings, graffiti, billboards, flyers, license plates, trash — all become integrated into the environment around us.

Between 2006-07 I contacted individuals around the world with hope that they would document their visual landscapes. Contributors were asked to photographically document specific artifacts of visual culture in their environment. The photographs were then compiled in an online database (www.flickr.com/groups/ethnographic), allowing the participants to view one another's contributions as well as download images and make comments on the website. My goal was to have individuals focus on how visual communication can make our communities similar, and also how it makes them unique.

Contributors were given a list of 29 objects to photograph, ranging from non-interpretive (take a photo of the front of today's paper) to subjective (take a photo of a provocative advertisement). The contrast between variable and control made for an exciting cross-cultural comparison.

By May 2007, I had received over 700 photographs from 25 individuals in 20 different countries, creating a polyphonous cross-cultural comparison of visual communication from across the globe. The project continues to present insight into how visual communication helps shape culture and identity. The images speak for themselves... .

SHARE YOUR WORLD / شرك علمك / 分享你的世界 / DEEL UW WERELD / MONTREZ LE MONDE / เผยใหเห็นโลกของคุณ / TEILEN SIE IHRE WELT / 너의 세상을 함께 나누자 / делите ваш мир / MASTRAR SU MUNDO / DÜNYAN PAYLAŞ/

SHARE YOUR WORLD

PROJECT INFO

Greetings! I sincerely thank you for your interest in this project.

The Visual Scavenger Hunt is part of the thesis I am undertaking as a master's degree candidate in Graphic Design/Visual Communications at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, USA. The goal of this project is to document the different (and often quite similar) visual landscapes encountered daily by people around the world. Often we do not notice how much our communities are shaped by various forms of visual communication. Posters, signs, advertisements, paintings, graffiti, billboards, flyers, license plates, trash—all become integrated into the environment around us.
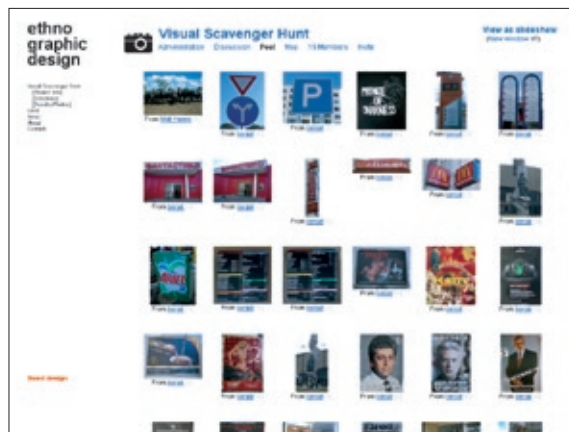
I have sent cameras around the world in hopes that we can share our visual landscapes with one another, sharing the things that make our communities similar, and also what makes them unique.

Your participation brings a distinct vision to this project. Thank you greatly for your help!

Best,
Ben Gaydos

Benjamin Gaydos
2101 Park Avenue, No. 6
Richmond, VA
US 23220-2701
ben@3toed.com

DIRECTIONS

The Visual Scavenger Hunt is designed to be a fun project! It will probably take between **1-2hrs**, but remember, **you do not need to finish it all at once.** Please complete as much as you can. If you have any questions about the process, or need help with translating the directions, please contact me at **ben@3toed.com.**

You have stated that you have access to a digital camera. If you do not, please let me know by emailing me using the email address above, I will be more than happy to supply you with a disposable camera. If you know someone else who you know would enjoy this project, please share it with them. If they would like to contribute—wonderful! The more diverse the project is the more rich the content will be. I would be happy to assist in any way that I can (eg., providing a disposable camera, paying postage,etc.). Email me to let me know!

Check the website to find more information about the project and to view the results from the Visual Scavenger Hunt:
http://www.3toed.com/ethnographic

Please complete the following steps:

Step 1: Complete the Visual Scavenger Hunt (on pg. 2). Check off the items you were able to photograph in the space provided.

Step 2: Upload your photos to www.flickr.com.

Uploading photos on flickr is fairly easy, but if you do have any problems, please email me at ben@3toed.com.

1. First go to www.flickr.com and sign in. You will need to sign up first, unless you already have an account. If you have a Yahoo account or Yahoo email address, then you are already a "member". Sign in with your username and password.

2. Go to www.flickr.com/photos/upload/ . Then select the files from your computer (or disc). Please number the photos according to the list (i.e. "#1, Take a picture of yourself" is "01.jpg") . Also include any notes or descriptions if you'd like (name, age, city, country, profession).

3. In the "add tags" box on the upload page, type "Visual Scavenger Hunt", your name in quotes, (i.e., "Benjamin Gaydos"), your country, and city.

4. The uploaded photos do not have to be that large (medium resolution), but save the original files on a disc (just in case). That way you'll always have the hi-res photos.

Step 3: Send me an email (ben@3toed.com) to let me know you've uploaded the photos. THANK YOU!

+ 👤 / 👩 + 📷 = !

VISUAL SCAVENGER HUNT

Take one photograph of as many of the following items as you can find in your community:

In and around your house
01. Take a picture of yourself
02. The front of today's paper
03. The inside of your food storage receptacle (refrigerator, pantry, etc.)
04. A container of laundry detergent
05. A business card
06. Your house or apartment number
07. The name of your street (on a street sign)

Advertisements
08. A poster/billboard advertising a movie
09. A poster/flyer advertising a musical even
10. A provocative advertisementt

In your community
11. A main road
12. A restaurant menu
13. A shelf of packaged groceries in a store
14. A license plate
15. A political poster, flyer, or billboard
16. A police car, fire truck or ambulance
17. An example of public art in your community
18. A religious image
19. A visual example of globalism
20. A T-shirt with a message on it
21. Graffiti on a building
22. Something well designed
23. Something poorly designed
24. A post office or post box

Signs
25. A sign without any words
26. A traffic sign
27. A grocery store sign
28. A sign made by the government
29. Public transit signage (bus, subway, train, etc)

Visit the website to view results from the scavenger hunt and to find out more info: **http://www.3toed.com/ethnographic**

NOTES

Use the space to comment on your findings.

_____
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INFO

Please fill out contact information below:

Name _____

Profession _____ Age_____

Address _____
_____
_____

Email _____

These images will be published on the web at http://www.flickr.com/, and possibly in printed form in a book. Please sign below to grant permission to publish the images. All images will be credited to you, the creator of the original work.

I will contact you via email when your work is online. You will have the ability to view the project and create discussions with me and others who contributed to the Visual Scavenger Hunt.
Thank you!

Signature_____

Date _____

Above: The directions sent to every participant/contributor.
Left: I asked friends from around the world to help me translate the goal of the project into 13 different languages.

Above: Scavenger Hunt Logo
Left: Website design (www.3toed.com/ethnographic) The website was the meeting place for all contributors, and a resource for individuals interested in anthropology and design.

Rendering of actual and potential contributors, December, 2006

Shelf labels (visible on the shelf edge):

BOVRIL
£1.89

MARMITE
£1.69

STAGG
£1.39

MINCED BEEF
99p

STEWED
£1.29

THE VISUAL SCAVENGER HUNT: THE CONTRIBUTORS

A shelf of groceries, Edinburgh Scotland, December 2006.

Photo by Yasmin Fedda

Antonio Zirión
Mexico, D.F.,
Mexico

Louis Rawlins
San Francisco, CA
United States

Edward and Mary Bunker
Kingaroy, Queensland
Australia

Vareesh Malik
Delhi,
India

Jinny Kim
Seoul,
South Korea

Julie Meitz
Lyon,
France

Karen Stein
Boston, Massachu-
setts
United States

Vessa Gugova
Sofia,
Bulgaria

Mark Heath
Voorschoten,
The Netherlands

Mark Prins,
Cape Town,
South Africa

Rinda Kanchanakhom,
Bangkok,
Thailand

Joao Lourenco and
Natalie Roethlin,
Bern, Switzerland

Sara Maestro,
Milan,
Italy

Setareh Ordoubadi
Shiraz/Tehran
Iran

Yasmin Fedda,
Edinburgh, Scotland,
United Kingdom

Andrew Sweet
Samala-Haut,
Togo
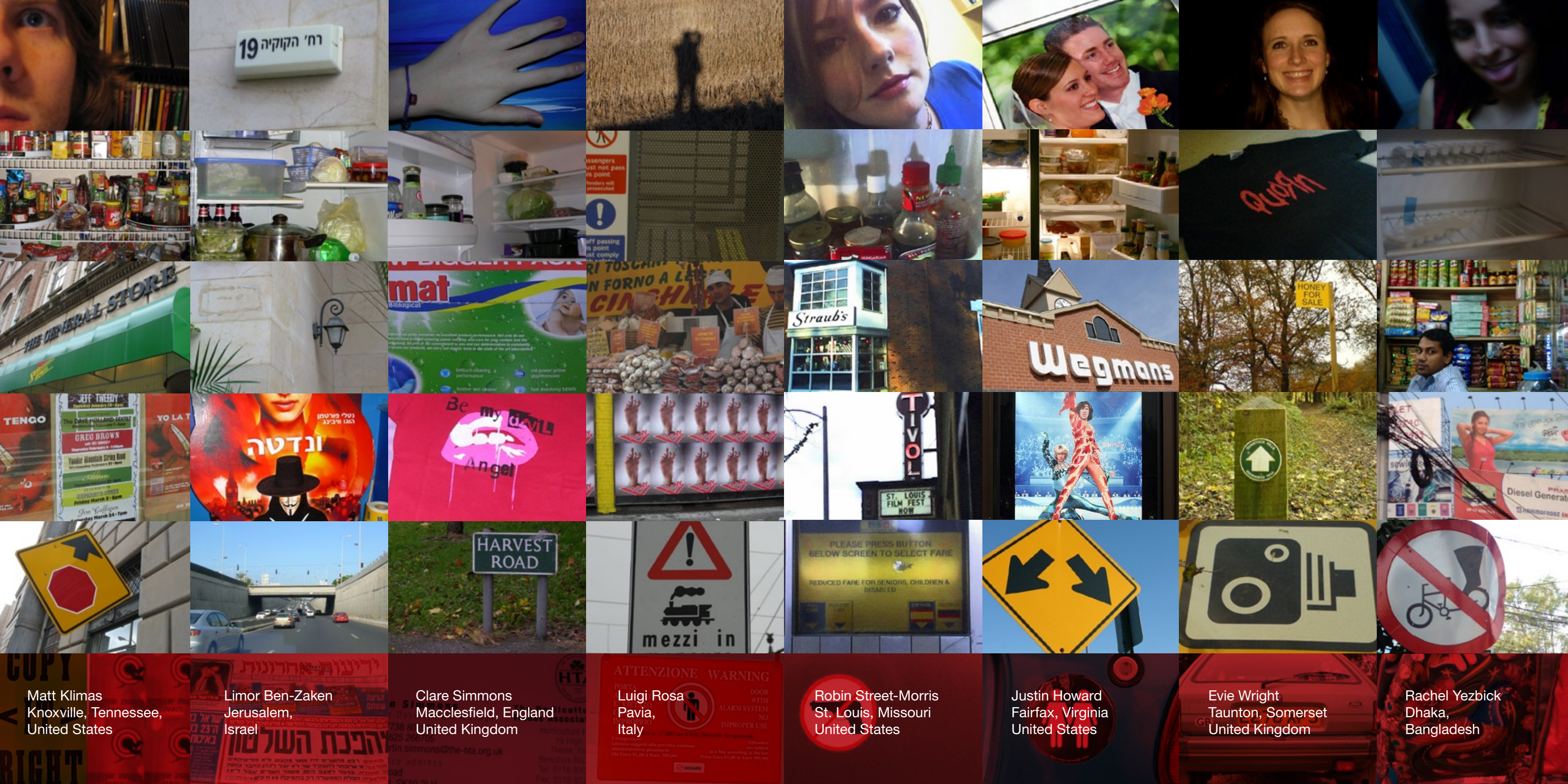
Matt Klimas
Knoxville, Tennessee,
United States

Limor Ben-Zaken
Jerusalem,
Israel

Clare Simmons
Macclesfield, England
United Kingdom

Luigi Rosa
Pavia,
Italy

Robin Street-Morris
St. Louis, Missouri
United States

Justin Howard
Fairfax, Virginia
United States

Evie Wright
Taunton, Somerset
United Kingdom

Rachel Yezbick
Dhaka,
Bangladesh

Photos by
Setareh Ordoubadi

Nearly all of the participants in the visual scavenger hunt submitted beyond what was asked for, sending additional photographs to help bring a broader understanding of their community and life. Such was the case with Setareh Ordoubadi, who shared stories of the residents of Shiraz, Iran, told through her intimate portraits.

VISUAL SCAVENGER HUNT

PARTICIPANTS

01. Antonio Zinón
Mexico, D.F.,
Mexico

02. Louis Rawlins
San Francisco, California
United States

03. Edward and Mary Bunker
Kingaroy, Queensland
Australia

04. Varoosh Malik
Delhi,
India

05. Jinny Kim
Seoul,
South Korea

06. Julie Meitz
Lyon,
France

07. Karen Stein
Boston, Massachusetts
United States

08. Vessa Gugova
Sofia,
Bulgaria

09. Mark Heath
Voorschoten,
The Netherlands

10. Mark Prins,
Cape Town,
South Africa

11. Pinda Kanchanakhom,
Bangkok,
Thailand

12. Joao Lourenco and
Natalie Roelfién,
Bern,
Switzerland

13. Sara Maestro,
Milan,
Italy

14. Setareh Ordoubadi
Shiraz/Tehran
Iran

15. Yasmin Fedda,
Edinburgh, Scotland,
United Kingdom

PROJECT INFO

The Visual Scavenger Hunt was initiated as part of my thesis project, "ethnographic design," as a master's degree candidate in Visual Communication/Design at Virginia Commonwealth University. The goal of this project is to document the different (and often quite similar) visual landscapes encountered daily by people around the world. Often we do not notice how much our communities are shaped by various forms of visual communication. Posters, signs, advertisements, paintings, graffiti, billboards, license plates, trash—all become integrated into the environment around us.

I asked participants around the world to share their visual landscapes with me and with one another—sharing the things that make our communities similar, and also what makes them unique. Each participant was given a list of 29 items to photograph, and encouraged to take any other photographs which they saw fit. Thus far over 700 photographs from 25 individuals were shared. This is a portion of those photographs from this ongoing project.

To view this project online (and to view the images in full size and in color) please visit:

www.3toed.com/ethnographic

ADDITIONAL PARTICIPANTS

16. Anotee Seeol
Namés-Haz,
Togo

17. Lily Zhang
Beijing,
China

18. Matt Klimer
Knoxville, Tennessee,
United States

19. Linor Ben-Zaken
Jerusalem,
Israel

20. Clara Simmons
Macclesfield, England
United Kingdom

21. Robin Street-Morris
St. Louis, Missouri
United States

22. Rachel Yurkiek
Dhaka,
Bangladesh

23. Free Wright
Taunton, Somerset
United Kingdom

24. Sandeep Rathod
Mumbai
India

25. Hong Lin
Shanghai
China

26. Justin Howard
Fairfax, Virginia
United States

Above: A comparative analysis of the correspondents and their submissions to the Visual Scavenger Hunt, prepared for the MFA Visual communication/Design exhibit, Re:Search, May 2007.

Re:Search
The MFA design exhibition

Left: The graduate student exhibition,
Re:Search, May 2007
Right: Viewing the Visual Scavenger
Hunt at the exhibition

Photo (above) by Andrea Quam

neighbors, ethnography & the blues: some joy, some pain

I met Lady E (Ethel Barnett-Johnson to her mother) in a basement, washing her socks. It was the basement we shared, as neighbors, in a pleasant apartment complex in the Fan District (Richmond, Virginia). It was the first time I encountered her unmistakable voice (which, as she says, "lives in the basement"), her perfume (which always enters before her and exits much later), her bracelets (a record of friends, family and fans), and just as pronounced — her vivaciousness and generosity. She spoke to my wife and I about laundry and about being late for work, as if we had known her for years. As we exited with our bicycles she extended an invitation to see her perform and sing at Emilio's on Friday.

For Lady E, the transition between being a good neighbor to becoming "subject matter" for a documentary film was not extraordinary. As we became friends, shared rides, our jazz collections and personal histories, I realized that her past and future were a part of her present in a significant way, silently directing her actions. She presented a dynamic and complex individual, who creates, receives and gives, without pretense, to others. She is someone we could all learn from that isn't afraid to tell you just how.

finding a voice

On an afternoon in December, I asked Lady E if she would want to make a film together about her life and the blues. She, without the slightest bit of hesitation, said "Of Course!".

In an experiment to test the pliable boundaries of ethnography, Lady E, my wife, visual anthropologist Julia Yezbick, and I began working on a collaborative film/performance ethnography that applied (somewhat) traditional ethnographic methods to a new type of presentation.

Although based on methods of informal interview and participant observation, the outcome of the project built upon an amalgamation of hand-painted film, Super8 film (shot by Lady E), documentary footage, and live performance. These techniques were explored as a means to express the emotional qualities of the music and the lived experience of Lady E as a performer whose music has allowed her to overcome hardship and celebrate life.

Lady E was more than subject matter, she was a co-creator and producer. In addition to shooting Super8 footage, she recorded audio journals and field recordings, talking directly to the listener. She was a critical part of both the ethnographic and creative process, reviewing every rough cut of the film and made suggestions and criticisms on edits. When it came time to give the film a title, she quietly said, "It's some joy, some pain", as simply as that.

The dialogical and co-creative approach allowed Lady E to tell *her* story with *her* voice. She also performed as part of the screening of the documentary, intertwining her performance with the soundtrack. The performative aspect allowed Lady E to not only verify our representations of her, but to continually re-create her own image of herself to an audience — each performance marked with its own peculiarities and nuances, emotional highs and lows. *some joy, some pain* is a celebration of life, love and the blues, told by a voice who lived it.

Left: Lady E with Bubby and Pierre, 1970.
Right: Pierre and Bubby, 1991
Photos courtesy of Lady E.

Left: Hand processing black and
white 8mm film.
Right: The super 8mm camera
used by Lady E to document her
daily life.

some joy, some pain

some joy, some pain.

collaboration

some joy, some pain was a completely new way of creating for me. While I had obviously worked in teams before, directly collaborating with my subject matter on all aspects of production was uncharted territory. I pride myself on having the ability to create completely self-generated films of all sorts and sizes — the longest being a 30-plus minute non-narrative film, and the shortest being a 20 second animation. Shifting my process to a more flexible, entirely collaborative method was extremely rewarding, and I feel it produced a film that speaks more directly, and to a wider audience than any previous film that I had worked on.

From the beginning I was certain that I wanted to create hand painted segments specifically for the film. I couldn't say why, exactly, but after showing Lady E the film, *Not Killing for Life* [p. 53], which I had created in 2005, she remarked that it was "like visual music". So with us both agreeing on the medium's ability to communicate emotion (especially when paired with sound), I began to paint directly on 16mm and 8mm clear film leader. Firstly I asked Lady E what "color" she was at her happiest, as well as her saddest. Together we determined that the segments would move from black, brown and blues to bright orange and golds. One viewer commented that these segments took you into Lady E's past, enveloping you in an abstractions of her memory.

We discussed the role of music and its integration into the film structure. How would we explore both ends of the emotional spectrum? How would the music and film function as a live performance? Again, the solutions were determined mutually, and with surprising ease.

We shared a mutual respect for each other's creative process, but were also flexible enough to be take risks that either one of us would not have taken on our own. Lady E toted around a clunky super 8mm camera (from the 60's) and a digital multi-track audio recorder (from the 00's) both with unfamiliar controls, for several weeks at a time, recording the moments and objects that she found important enough to share with the reset of the world. She sat through difficult questions about painful times in her life while my wife, Julia, and I pointed cameras and microphones in her direction. On the other hand, I immersed myself into someone else's life and story that was, on many occasions, emotionally and physically draining, and relinquished complete control of a process I had always done alone. But by building a collaboration out of friendship and trust, we both were freely able to embrace a new way of creating which yielded results beyond what either of us would have created on our own.

Those results were presented at a public screening of *some joy, some pain* on May 5th 2007 during the graduate student exhibition, *Re:Search*.

some joy, some pain.
performance/screening
05 May 2007

Photos by Katherine Gaydos

Building Communities:
design research & pedagogy

In academia, and increasingly in the business world, we are seeing the "intermingling" of disciplines, the sharing of previously discrete knowledge, and the blurring of clearly defined partitions. In my own education I found it quite natural to move from engineering to art, and freely between my three cognates, design, cultural anthropology and film. I apply the same holistic approach to design education. Design is the glorious open landscape between art and science, objectivity and subjectivity, poetics and pragmatics (or Dada and data, if you like). I feel that a strong designer has the ability to balance rationality and emotion, and to communicate from variant perspectives. It is for this reason that I teach students to be observant, to engage in a dialogue with their audience and with other disciplines to cultivate understanding.

The following pages elaborate on this approach to design education. I present two projects — the first for a Sophomore Imaging course (Comics-Vérité), the second for a Junior Sequential Design course — the project descriptions (pp. 132-133) and student work (pp. 134-135). On p. 137 is a outline for a planned interdisciplinary course between the graphic design and anthropology departments, for Spring 2008.

Comics-Vérité,
Sophomore level, Imaging 2

Broad Street Project,
Junior level, Sequential Lab

Comics have been long (dis)regarded in the US as a low-brow form of mass entertainment. This section of the course will reevaluate the role of narrative in sequential art by critically examining the structure of comics. We will argue the possibility of conveying or finding 'truth' in image, and whether or not it is applicable in the creation of sequential art.

During the first two weeks of Part II, students will collaborate with groups from the Visual Anthropology 391 course to develop the visual language of an ethnographic documentary. Each student will then use the remainder of the 5 week project to apply their research to the creation of a large-format documentary comic (using photography, illustration, collage/mixed media, or a combination of the three), utilizing the unique structure of sequential art in an "experimental" non-fiction context.

Students will accompany the anthropologists while they conduct their field research. They will also spend time observing and discussing what is visually important to the story and how the film could be structured. The anthropology students will provide the designers with a one-page proposed written outline of their film. The designers will use this outline to create a sequential documentary narrative.

Designers create for people. People live in places.

It is imperative for designers to understand the environment they are creating for and communicating with.

As a class, we will document the area of Broad Street most used by VCU's student population. Each student will observe and document using any method(s) or form(s) they see fit (including, but not limited to: drawing, photo, video, rubbings, audio recording, etc).

Using the material gathered, each student will create a work consisting of both time-based media (video) and sequential print components. Final project: DVD and packaging.

The final piece should convey a sense of place through the interaction of time and space, image and text. Each work will be evaluated on process, effort, creativity and the ability of the student to apply learned technological skills to the project.

Above: Satellite photo of Broad Street between Bowe and Belvidere, Richmond, Virginia (Google Earth)

Above: CHAN, Karen Sagun,
Documentary Sequential Narrative,
Imaging 2, Spring 2007

Above: Broad Thoughts, Marc O'Brien,
Broad Street Project,
Sequential Design, Fall 2006

Broad Street, Cassandra Ellison,
Broad Street Project,
Sequential Design, Fall 2006

GDES 391:
Design,
Anthropology
and the
Community

An advanced interdisciplinary
course that explores the role
of graphic design in the commu-
nity. The course will examine
cultural identity, culturally specific
visual communication, and the
assessment of community needs.
Students will use the skills and
knowledge developed in the
classroom to work directly with
a non-profit organization in
the Richmond area.

Photos and Lego peeps by Andrew Becraft
www.brothers-brick.com/

For more information contact ben@3wed.com

GDES 391:
Design, Anthropology
and the Community

Design Anthropology and the Community is an advanced interdisciplinary course that explores localized visual communication through the application of cultural anthropology methods.

The course will explore cultural identity, culturally specific visual communication, and assessment of community needs on the local level. Firstly, students will study the role of visual communication and cultural identity within their local community, through observation and documentation. Secondly, students will look at how methods of cultural anthropology can be incorporated into the design process (participant observation, collaboration, documentation and analysis). Finally, they will apply these approaches to a community based design problem.

The interdisciplinary nature of the course encourages cross-pollination of ideas through collaboration. Design students will pair with their anthropology counterparts to study the various cultural forms of visual communication in Richmond, each student sharing their disciplinary expertise with the other. Together, design and anthropology student teams will develop a project with a local non-profit organization from beginning to end — crafting a proposal, participating in field research and designing a project based on community needs.

Further Directions

I spent the better portion of graduate school researching anthropological theory and methodology — some of which I had studied and practiced before, much that I had not. I then retrofitted it to the needs and processes of a graphic designer. Studying the ways in which the methods practiced by cultural anthropologists could be (or if they *should* be) appropriated by graphic designers, I crafted a document that outlined these ideas. In that document, which evolved through research and practical application, I present an argument that [ethno]graphic design could be easily integrated into the designer's creative process; it explains the methods one could apply as an [ethno]graphic designer, and the benefits of doing so. While this document helped structure my ideas into a methodology that could be applied to a design project, I realized I was without a "real-world" design project to apply the methodology to.

The studies developed for this creative project were attempts to find a beneficial meeting ground between the disciplines of anthropology and design. Each one provoked questions that the next study would attempt to answer, often leaving me with even more questions than I started with. I found out that certain anthropological methods, be they ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, collaboration, polyphonous/multivocal representation and self-evaluation, can greatly aid a graphic designer, in many situations. Design educators need to present opportunities for students to experience cross-disciplinary design. Practitioners need to understand how to be socially-minded and how to encourage their clients to be so as well.

[ethno]graphic design is an ever-evolving process. The methods should be continuously reevaluated and tested further. As one of my fellow classmates said, I need to practice what I preach. I plan to do just that.

DESIGNING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

DESIGN STUDIES
THEORY AND RESEARCH IN GRAPHIC DESIGN

CLIFFORD MARCUS

Writing Culture
The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography

MATERIALIZING THE NATION

f Bliss
A conversation between Robert Gardner + Ákos Östör

king Images

HANDBOOK OF
Visual Communication
Edited By Sarah Pink, László Kürti and Ana Isabel Afonso

Afrikan Alphabets

Cross-Cultural Design

ESEARCH
LUPTON | MILLER

AMERICAN SIGNS
Lisa Mahar

EDITOR

Design Research

ETHNOGRAPHY THROUGH
THICK AND THIN

Experimental Ethnography

COLES
DOING DOCUMENTARY
WORK

INTRODUCING
Lévi-Strauss
Boris Wiseman and Judy Groves

DUKE

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[thanks]

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