Principles of Visual Design
Central European University (CEU)
Fall 2023
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Friday, 10.40h – 12.50h
C120 – Mirabaud Media Lab
4 ECTS

Course Description
We almost all design, and usually poorly. From PowerPoints & Prezis to social media presences and multimedia academic presentations, we are often required to design materials that are intended to effectively communicate visual information, without the necessary training to do so. Drawing from classical principles to contemporary trends, this workshop-based course instructs students in the fundamental principles of design, including the use of composition, form, counterform, point, line, plane, color, visual rhythm, and typography. Students will apply these principles to then create successful visual communication in a variety of media. Examples are drawn from a variety of different media, including video, animation, still images of designs, paintings, illustrations, photographs, and more. This course will also explore how the mind processes visual information.

Learning Outcomes
Upon completion of this module, students will be able to:
- Identify a range of design methods, processes, materials, and contexts
- Apply basic elements of visual design including balance, color, dynamics, expression, form, growth, light, movement, sequence, shape, space
- Use visual design terms and formal language to communicate
- Analyze the effectiveness of works of art and design, recognizing strengths and citing areas for improvement
- Identify or integrate methods, processes, and/or materials that are relevant to project development
- Explain or describe the particulars of the student’s process for creating a given work, and the decisions made along the way

Learning Activities / Teaching Methods
The course is structured as a workshop, with a relatively small number of students, and direct student participation in every session. This participation entails taking part in class discussions, but also in critiques, in which students present their work for critique, or offer feedback on the work of others students. Learning activities include lectures on relevant topics, viewing and discussion of media examples, in-class technical instruction, in-class practical exercises, and assignments completed outside of class time.
Assessment
Students proceed through a series of practical exercises that will lead to completion of a final project, establishing a foundation for advanced production coursework. Practical exercises are worked on both in and outside of class which explore and demonstrate basic concepts of critical visual thinking, graphic design and digital production tools. A final publication project incorporating these explorations accounts for a large percentage of the final course grade.

Grading Breakdown
Attendance / Participation: 20%
Exercises / Presentations: 40%
Final Submission: 40%

Exercises
05% Exercise 01: Things I Did Today / Notecard Territories (Elements & Principles)
05% Exercise 02: Nonlinear Timelines (Notecard Collages)
05% Exercise 03: A Color Has Many Faces
10% Exercise 04: Collage as Proposal / Displaced Spaces
15% Exercise 05: Impossible Poster Campaign
40% Final Publication (Visual Essay) / Portfolio

Readings
For each reading you’ll write a short response in the discussion forum. This is mostly just a way to encourage that you spend some time with the texts, raise questions, and have more context for the work we’re doing. Some texts we’ll talk about together in class, others are just for your own well-being.

Software
Because the landscape of software and technology is in a constant state of transformation, updates and revisions, this course will stress the importance of learning “how to learn” software and its ability to both aid and hinder critical visual thinking. Everyone learns differently, and with software it’s often just a case of knowing where and how to look for resources and accepting that patience and frustration are a large part of the process.

For each exercise tutorials and other technical info will be addressed. Depending on the work being done for the final projects this will include the basics of Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign, among others. You’ll need to be self-motivated though, software can only be learned by ‘doing’. Please see the end of this document for links to YouTube tutorials.
Working Schedule

**Session 01**  
Sept. 22\(^{nd}\) 2023  
*Elements and Principles of Design (Visual Grammar)*  
**Lecture:** The Choreography of Attention, Design as Visual Dialect  
**Exercise 01:** Things I Did Today / Notecard Territories (Elements & Principles)  
**Reading:** Steven Heller, *The Graphic Design Idea Book*  
**Software:** Markers, Notecards

**Session 02**  
Sept. 29\(^{th}\) 2023  
*Elements and Principles of Design (Visual Grammar) cont.*  
**Discussion / Group Critique of Exercise 01**  
**Lecture:** Construction of Meaning through Form, Context & Materiality  
**Exercise 02:** Nonlinear Timelines (Notecard Collages)  
**Reading:** Rahul Kumar, “Artists who pushed the boundaries through materiality,”  
David Salle, “Interview with John Baldessari”  
**Software:** Previous Exercise, Scanner, Glue, Phone

**Session 03**  
Oct. 6\(^{th}\) 2023  
*Elements and Principles of Design (Visual Grammar) cont.*  
**Discussion / Group Critique of Exercise 02, Software Intro**  
**Lecture:** The Politics of Color  
**Exercise 03:** A Color Has Many Faces  
**Software:** Adobe Illustrator

**Session 04**  
Oct. 13\(^{th}\) 2023  
*Layout, the Space of the Page / Screen (Rhythm & Meaning)*  
**Discussion / Group Critique of Exercise 03, Software Intro**  
**Lecture:** Unhinged Signifiers, Compositing, Granular Collage  
**Exercise 04:** Collage as Proposal / Displaced Spaces  
**Reading:** Regan Golden, “Collage as a Way of Living”  
**Software:** Adobe Photoshop, Text to Image AI, Adobe Illustrator
Session 05
Oct. 20th 2023
*Layout, the Space of the Page / Screen (Rhythm & Meaning) cont.
Exercise 04 cont. in class
Reading: Ellen Lupton, *Thinking with Type*, Theo Inglis, “How Designer + Activist + Historian David King Defined a Visual Style for the Left”

Session 06
Oct. 27th 2023
*Layout, the Space of the Page / Screen (Rhythm & Meaning) cont.
Discussion / Group Critique of Exercise 04, Software Intro
Lecture: Design Grids, Layout Hierarchy, Typography
Exercise 05: Impossible Poster Campaign
Reading: Steven Heller, “Can the World be Changed by Posters”
Software: Adobe InDesign, Adobe Photoshop, Text to Image AI

Session 07
Nov. 3rd 2023
*Layout, the Space of the Page / Screen (Rhythm & Meaning) cont.
Exercise 05 cont. in class
Reading: Chappell Ellison, “Can Designers Save the World Without Creating More Stuff,” Steven Heller, *Graphic Style Lab*

Session 08
Nov. 10th 2023
*Final Publication (Visual Essay)*
Final Publication/Portfolio Discussions, Group Critique of Exercise 05
Lecture: Visual Essays, Publication Formats (Making Public)
Exercise: Final Publication Research / Drafts (Visual Essay)
Reading: George Perec, *Species of Spaces*
Software: Project Dependent

Session 09
Nov. 17th 2023
*Final Publication (Visual Essay) cont.*
Final Publication/Portfolio Discussions and Workshopping
Exercise: Final Publication (Visual Essay) / Portfolio
Reading: Project Dependent
Session 10
Nov. 24th 2023
*Final Publication (Visual Essay) cont.
Individual Meetings - Final Publication/Portfolio
Exercise: Final Publication / Portfolio cont.

Session 11
Dec. 1st 2023
*Final Publication (Visual Essay) cont.
Exercise: Final Publication / Portfolio cont.

Session 12
Dec. 8th 2023
* Final Publication (Visual Essay) / Portfolio Due
Discussion / Group Critique

*Software Tutorials

Adobe Illustrator
Adobe Illustrator for Beginners: Get Started in 10 Minutes
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NBKRywEbNs
Adobe Illustrator Tutorials Playlist
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLl8IaUbuW2VsECwJ_kE0LGVLg947KyQ2

Adobe Photoshop
Adobe Photoshop for Complete Beginners
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTzvQkOlEii2U&list=PLLlSBGLVsEPIFGSGw2zJ2K43V5vXMIMT&index=1
Adobe Photoshop Tutorials Playlist
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLLlSBGLVsEPIFGSGw2zJ2K43V5vXMIMT

Adobe InDesign
Adobe InDesign for Beginners
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHDy_nEvgd4
Adobe InDesign Tutorials Playlist
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHDy_nEvgd4&list=PLYfCBK8lpQ7YoUHtYKxavLHO-31C-Vky

Text to Image Generation (AI)
Firefly (Adobe Photoshop)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sp6K3qpVFO0
Exercise 01: Things I Did Today / Notecard Territories (Elements & Principles)

Format / Materials: ca. 50 Notecards (A5) / Markers, Pens, Pencils, etc.
Due: Session 02 / Sept. 29th 2023
Weight: 05% of Overall Grade

In this exercise we’ll be working outside of the computer and on paper with the Elements and Principles of Design. Using these fundamental building blocks, you’ll make a series of compositions on notecards that explore how attention is focused on a surface, and how mark can create, edit, and focus meaning. One set of notecards should explore this with textual elements (Things I Did Today), while the other should try to function outside of language (Notecard Territories).

Prompts

*Things I Did Today (min. 25 Notecards)
On a set of notecards, write down some things you did today. Pay attention to where text is placed, experiment with different ways of writing words, approaches to description, and what’s needed to communicate an event; no matter how banal or dramatic it was. Try isolating events to a single card, writing lists, clouds, etc. Think about it as a way of editing and reordering time.

*Notecard Territories (min. 25 Notecards)
Treating each notecard as a political stage, create a series of visual compositions. Experiment with the ways shape, line, color, and texture come into conflict with one another as well as trying to resolve the conflicts you set into play; again, using shape, line, color, and texture. Try to keep it abstract, exploring how mark, gesture and speed express and occupy space.

*Notes:
- What is visual conflict? Is it about the behavior of elements on a page, their vectors, paths, shape languages, textures, hues, attitudes, etc.?
- What is visual resolution? Is it as simple as finding ways for different elements to meet, touch and transform one another?
- Pay especially close attention to how you create relationships by exploring different attitudes toward the boundaries of the notecard. Not only how each visual move relates to the next, but also to the space of the notecard itself.
- Your work is highly subjective, there’s no answer to the exercise, only exploration and experimentation. The aim of the exercise is to become more sensitive to the behavior of form, and the ways in which we understand and create meaning on a two-dimensional support.

Reference
Elements and Principles of Design PDF
Steven Heller, The Graphic Design Idea Book
**Exercise 02: Nonlinear Timelines (Notecard Collages)**

**Format / Materials:** ca. 20 Collages / Photocopies, Found Materials, Adhesive, etc.

**Due:** Session 03 / Oct. 6th 2023

**Weight:** 05% of Overall Grade

**Prompt**

Nothing we perceive exists in isolation. We understand visual phenomena based on its social, political, and formal context.

Using your work from the Exercise 01 as a jumping off point, create a series of at least 20 collages that explore how difference can create coherence.

Experiment with relationships, using context, sequence, and composition to transform the identity, attitude, and temporality of your previous works.

**Notes:**

- Experiment with materials that you think are different and somehow unrelated as well as with ones that you think are closely related.

- Because your materials will be a variety of sizes and shapes, there’s no set format. Pay close attention to how you document and present your work (scanned, photographed, glued, etc.) and how it changes the reading of it.

- Try taking your notecards for a walk, placing them in new settings where they don’t belong. Bake them, freeze them, erase them. Build something with them.

- There’s no correct way to do this, the aim of the exercise is to become more sensitive to the ways context and sequence can transform the life and signification of visual phenomena.

**Reference:**

Elements and Principles of Design PDF

Rahul Kumar, “Artists who pushed the boundaries through materiality”

David Salle, “Interview with John Baldessari”
Exercise 03: A Color Has Many Faces

**Format / Materials:** ca. 20 Digital Studies (Illustrator)
**Due:** Session 04 / Oct. 13th 2023
**Weight:** 05% of Overall Grade

**Prompt**

Using Adobe Illustrator, explore specific exercises from the book *Interaction of Color* by Josef Albers. These tests should help to serve as a basis for becoming more sensitive to the behavior of color through trial and experimentation.

A minimum of 20 (digital) studies should be made by following these two exercises from the book:

*A Color Has Many Faces - The Relativity of Color* (Chapter IV) (PDF pg.9)
*Reversed Grounds* (Chapter VI) (PDF pgs.10-11)

**Notes:**

- This is not about whether you like a color or not but a way to explore visual biases, and hopefully move beyond taste.

- Color is elastic...

- Pay close attention to what kinds of colors are more stubborn than others, how they respond to their neighbors. Are they persuaded easily by their surroundings or do they keep a consistent identity no matter what conditions they're in?

- There's no correct way to do this, the aim of the exercise is to become more sensitive to the ways color behaves.

**Reference:**

Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color*
Tomashi Jackson, “The Linguistic Overlap of Color Theory and Racism”

Adobe Illustrator for Beginners: Get Started in 10 Minutes
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NBK RywEbNs
Adobe Illustrator Tutorials Playlist
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLI8IaUbuW2VsECwJ__kE0LGVLg947KvQ2
Exercise 04: Collage as Proposal / Displaced Spaces

Format / Materials: ca. 20 Digital Collages (Photoshop)
Due: Session 06 / Oct. 27th 2023
Weight: 10% of Overall Grade

Prompt

Collage is an incredibly powerful tool for allowing difference to exist on a single support. Using collage as a technique, explore how different spaces and meanings can be collapsed and juxtaposed. Try inserting one room into another, an interior image into an exterior, people into places they don’t belong, etc. Experiment with producing impossible realities; whether political, spatial, or physical.

*Notes:

- Try using imagery that’s both close to your daily life as well as far away.
- For each study ask yourself how you can manipulate the form of the image(s) in order to rearrange its content. Some possibilities would be to bring the outside inside, remove or re-position objects, layer different views of a space or objects upon themselves, etc.
- Familiarize and employ some of the basic tools of Photoshop: selection tools, layers, masks and image adjustments.
- Text to image AI generators (now available in PS) are essentially collage at the granular level, experiment with them.
- The objective is to generate studies which are speculative, the formal approach helping to articulate and echo the concept. Think of each collage as a proposition; a study which helps you to think about possibilities.
- Again, there’s no correct way to do this…

Reference:
Pinterest Search: Collage Art
Regan Golden, “Collage as a Way of Living”
Theo Inglis, “How Designer + Activist + Historian David King Defined a Visual Style for the Left”

Adobe Photoshop for Complete Beginners
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTzvQkOll2U&list=PLLlSbGLVsEPiFGSGw2zJ2K43V5vxMMMTE&index=1
Adobe Photoshop Tutorials Playlist
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLLlSbGLVsEPiFGSGw2zJ2K43V5vxMMMTE
Firefly Tutorial (Adobe Photoshop AI Generator)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sp6K3qpVFQ0
Exercise 05: Impossible Poster Campaign

Format / Materials: Poster Analysis / Campaign (InDesign) / Printed
Due: Session 08 / Nov. 10th 2023
Weight: 15% of Overall Grade

Prompt

Part A - Poster Copy & Analysis
After picking a poster from the provided collection, use InDesign to make a gridded analysis followed by a copy of the design. The objective of this assignment is to excavate the invisible structure of the poster’s logic and attempt to locate its design DNA. After you’ve found the guiding principles of the design, use your grid and research to make a copy of the poster. You will be asked to present your findings and poster copy, emphasizing what it is that you discovered lying beneath the surface of the design. This study is about the behavior of the elements on the page not just their superficial appearance. Work from the larger organizing moves to the smaller, establishing the primary grid then slowly gaining more detail and refinement.

Part B – Impossible Poster Campaign
Using the structure and design DNA of your analyzed poster, you will create a series of posters for an impossible event (minimum of 3). It is not important that the poster looks like the one that it’s based on but rather that the behavior of its elements refer to a deeper understanding of the ideas you discovered in the process. This is not meant to be a simple copy with replaced information. Mutate and turn its grid on itself, experiment with rearranging hierarchies. In short, take ownership of the design. Make posters which are inspired by an understanding of your analysis and continue some of the questions you established in the collage exercise.

*Notes:
- The size of your document should be either A3 (297 x 420mm) or A4 (210 x 297mm)
- Because some of the typefaces used will be difficult to find or too expensive to license, your copy should approximate them as best as possible with what’s available.
- It’s incredibly important that you break elements into layers, not only for the ease of working within your document but also to help organize your thinking about the content and its role as graphical elements.
- The analysis is due in pdf form.
- The poster is due in both printed and pdf forms.

Reference:
Pinterest Poster Collection
Poster Copy & Analysis Examples
Anatomy of a Typeface
Ellen Lupton, Thinking with Type
Steven Heller, “Can the World be Changed by Posters”

Adobe InDesign for Beginners
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHdy_nEvGd4
Adobe InDesign Tutorials Playlist
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHdy_nEvGd4&list=PLYfCBK8lplO7YoUHiYKxavLHQ-31C-Vky
Exercise: Final Publication (Visual Essay)

Format / Materials: Project Specific  
Due: Session 12 / Dec. 08th 2023  
Weight: 40% of Overall Grade

Prompt

For your final project you will be asked to work on a visual essay. In order to do this, you should begin from a question (or series of questions) that can be addressed visually. Your questions should be clear but have no answer. This is about developing a thesis without a conclusion.

*Notes:

- There's no fixed format, material, or length. Each of you will define what you're exploring and ultimately how it should be materialized.

- Broadly speaking, 'publication' just means to make something public…

- We'll be discussing these projects throughout the entire semester, workshopping ideas, and looking at a wide range of 'publication' examples.

- Try not to start from an image of what you want it to look like but let its appearance emerge in the process (research, experimentation, mockups, etc.)

- Again, there's no correct way to do this, but it should reflect what you've learned, demonstrate a great deal of commitment, and highlight where you want to go with your creative work.

Reference:

Chappell Ellison, “Can Designers Save the World Without Creating More Stuff”  
Steven Heller, Graphic Style Lab  
George Perec, Species of Spaces