

The textual photograph: **emergent stories in an emerging social sphere**

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The proliferation and immediacy of digital images has created vibrant new social communities based around image sharing. Websites like Flickr or Facebook provide simple tools for telling evolving stories to ever increasing networks of people. The resulting mash-up of text, image, and video is changing the way stories are told and consumed. Nevertheless, many of these newer narrative conventions are built on older analog ones maintaining a connection to the past. Leveraging the power of visual narratives is an excellent way to teach students that live in that social space but do not always understand the power and complexities of visual narratives.

The narrative arc

We enter the world while a photographic device of some kind stares. It captures our entrance and doesn't stop recording our lives- at least the pivotal moments- till we leave the world. The technologies simply vanish from our consciousness; neither the flash of a camera nor the hum of video tape elicits notice. Image making like the conversation it engenders is an essential part of our lives from the very beginning.

These two modalities - the oral and the visual- define our narrative arcs. What good, after all, is a photograph if it doesn't elicit conversation? And how often has conversation been interrupted long enough to dig out a photo to supply the needed evidence to the oral retelling of a tale? The late German author W.G. Sebald, who built his unique fiction around the interplay of image and text, became himself a photographer and ardent collector of images only after missing an opportunity to capture twins on a bus in rural Italy bearing an uncanny resemblance to Franz Kafka- whose trail he was coincidentally retracing. The actual event was returned to fiction in his novel *Vertigo*: "I remained motionless on that bus seat from then on, embarrassed to the utmost degree and consumed with an infinite rage at the fact that I would now have no evidence whatsoever to document this most improbable coincidence." (Sebald, 2000) A strong statement from a man of words.

Stories woven into images

Pictures have been with us longer than language itself. Science informs us that human thinking is more reliant on visual and auditory images and propositional logic than it is on language (Pinker, 1995). And yet we never seem to stop talking. Even the photograph itself has been transformed into a metaphor to describe the world: images are burned into memory and scenes are framed as if through a viewfinder. But photography is far more than frozen moments burned to film or encoded in binary data. When gathered into large collections, they tell us who we were at specific moments and what life was like in specific places. The medium (black and white, Kodachrome, cell phone photos, etc.) marks time as we equate the look of the photo- its sepia tones, or Polaroid borders- with specific time periods. And of course the contents within the photo betray specific information- photographs are culturally carbon-dated. This small portable print also comes to define our physical spaces: armies of personal photos line the perimeter of our desks like fortresses against outside invasion. But perhaps most significantly photographs are viral. We pick up attitudes much as we pick up voice rhythms through conversation. Roland Barthes wrote: "Show your photographs to someone- he will immediately show you his" (Barthes 1982). There is a kind of call-and-response to image sharing; the photo acting as the visual *lingua franca*. We learn to 'read' what pictures 'mean' and these readings come to reinforce behavior through mimicry eventually cohering into types. And while the well composed images of advertising represent the desired ways of doing, the vernacular photos often describe who we really are as we navigate the clichés of standard photo typologies.

The textural image

When a technology becomes as pervasive as digital photography it loses its original grasp on the cultural imagination resulting in a redefinition of its purpose. The digital camera, which now also captures video, is as much a life-style accessory as it is a capture device. Its dematerialization and subsequent nesting inside other

technologies like mobile phones intertwines it with oral communication making the image less discrete and more fluid. All digital data flows into a single binary stream. What differentiates the image now in that stream is its tag- a descriptive word or two- helping place and connect it to billions of other images, text, and media clips. The result is a kind of 'textual image'. The photograph now merges with much larger stories creating spatially dispersed narratives. With this transformation comes a greater immediacy and a new emphasis on the quotidian. Such images reinforce daily activity as opposed to the 'historic' image and amplify our daily chatter- the language required to keep us connected. According to British psychologist Robin Dunbar this type of conversation- which he classifies as gossip- accounts for approximately 66% of all verbal communication and is the essential ingredient for social cohesion.(Dunbar 1998) And like gossip, these images fly around cyberspace with amazing speed finding their way through the global village sometimes in mere minutes and dynamically constructing complex and fractured narratives. But are photographs like these really new or the result of digital technology?

Evidence as narrative thread

In the fall of 2006 I encountered the work of Jane Fulton Suri- *Thoughtless Acts* (Fulton-Suri 2005) and Richard Wentworth- *Making Do and Getting By* (Groom, 2005) simultaneously and quite by accident. And like Sebald and his Kafkaesque encounter, I immediately saw the connection. Here were two sets of images (photographs) bearing an uncanny similarity to each other even while the intentions behind them were, at least at first glance, entirely different. I contacted Jane who works as a design researcher in San Francisco for the industrial design firm IDEO and Richard who is a sculptor based in London and a professor at Oxford University. Because I use ethnographic photography to teach my students how to look and understand the world, I wondered just how far apart their respective stories were. I began a series of one-on-one interviews followed by a joint discussion to try to discover the larger contexts of their work. I felt very strongly that the articulation of their stories- how they used pictures- would only deepen my own understanding of visual narratives and extend my teaching.

The conversations resulted in over 27,000 words of transcribed text proving once again that pictures can generate thousands of words. But unlike heroic images or beautiful photographs of the world, the images that Jane Suri Fulton and Richard Wentworth make focus on the 'small gesture'- quiet demonstrations of our commonality. A practice they have been engaged in for over 30 years in mostly an analog version. These tiny gestures have enabled them to weave highly evolved and elaborate stories revealing much larger human patterns and motivations. Susan Sontag wrote that the photograph 'thickens the environment we recognise as modern' and these photos- *doppelgänger* as opposed to identical twins- share a visual DNA that thickens their individual narratives. Wentworth's sculptures may not exist to solve human problems, but they do connect the viewer to shared human instincts. His photographic work can be detected deep within his enigmatic sculptures. And the photographs generated by IDEO are more than jumping-off points for creating new products. They map in very fine detail the thoughtless interactions of our daily existence in surprising and amusing ways. And such interactions once understood lead to very broad and long ranging design insights. These photographic collections operate as small portable pieces of the world connected through incredibly nuanced stories their creators have woven over many years.

The power of taxonomies

Jane Fulton Suri's writes in the preface to her book: "Thoughtless acts are those intuitive ways we adapt, exploit, and react to things in our environment; things we do without really thinking. Some actions, such as grabbing onto something for balance, are universal and instinctive. Others, such as warming hands on a hot mug or stroking velvet, draw on experience so deeply embodied that they are almost unconscious. Still more, such as hanging a jacket to claim a chair, have become spontaneous through habit or social learning. Observing such everyday interactions reveals subtle details about how we relate to the designed and natural world. This is key information and inspiration for design, and a good starting point for any creative initiative." Richard Wentworth describes it like this: "...you can trace various sort of linguistic things through those pictures, and it doesn't take very long to realise that some are warnings and some are repairs and some are reminders and some are adjustments. And some of them are kind of subsections: some of them you would use a word like jamming and others are wedging. There's a hell of a lot of resistance to gravity and I think my work has a lot to do with gravity..." Both sets of images tend towards taxonomies- descriptions of the world and the repertoire of responses that we adhere to and abide by.

The activities that Jane describes- adapting, exploiting, and reacting; grabbing, warming, or stroking- are quickly internalised. They are less about action and more about social instinct. And Fulton Suri's taxonomy nestles inside of Wentworth's occasionally intersecting it. Adapting and adjusting share commonalities while warning and reacting are clearly related. Wentworth is attracted to a lower level 'common sense' knowledge which he connects to agrarian culture; knowledge he fears is disappearing. Fulton Suri's pursuits, on the other hand, are connected more directly to our experience with artifacts. She views design as a bridge to different types of knowledge and a way to connect diverse ways of understanding.

Building new narrative bridges

The power to observe is a difficult skill to teach while the power to interpret observations is even more difficult. These two skills feed off of each other. Observation leads to insight leading to yet more observation. The technology at our fingertips allows us to capture and share such observations faster than ever before and build those insights into singular or collective stories. Teaching design is about detecting and interpreting patterns and connecting them to larger contexts. As the industrial designer Yves Behar describes it: "Life brings stories to design....design brings stories to life."

I would like to end with a short slide show of text, image, and sound. I create these open-ended presentations to teach my students ways of noticing their world and analyzing it to uncover deeper meanings. I emphasise that everything around us is in a constant process of unfolding if we care to notice. With no way of connecting disparate pieces into a unified whole, the world remains storyless. And while history is a vital part of any education it tends to exclude personal reflection suggesting that what is done cannot be undone. Teaching a student to see and connect through images and ideas enables them to think deeply about speculative histories or alternative causalities. In the world we now inhabit such thinking is vital. We must teach students to look past established histories to uncover the smaller 'story'.

The following narrative is constructed around the concept of erosion manifested through language and artifacts. According to author Guy Deutscher erosion in language happens through two processes: oral simplification and the slow compression of large metaphors into single words (Deutscher, 2006). This process is vital to keeping language alive. Few students would connect such a process to design even though they experience the phenomena of erosion and compression through text messaging everyday. In design and architecture, function, ornamentation, and meaning are assaulted by many of the same forces of change brought on by simplification, integration, and a constant desire for novelty and expression. From the language of classical architecture to the leg of a piece of modern furniture or the redesign of a mobile phone erosion is everywhere.

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