4.053 Visual Communication Fundamentals (FA2020)

Instructor: Bo-Won Keum (bkeum@mit.edu)
TA: Emma Pfeiffer
(emmapf@mit.edu)
Times: Tuesdays 2–5PM,  
Thursdays 9AM–12PM
Zoom ID: 314 258 1500

Website: fundamentals.bo-won.com

Course Description
This course provides an introduction to visual communication, emphasizing the development of a visual and verbal vocabulary. It presents the fundamentals of line, shape, color, composition, visual hierarchy, word/image relationships and typography as building blocks for communicating with clarity, emotion, and meaning. You will develop your ability to analyze, discuss and critique your work and the work of the designed world.

We will use readings, screenings, history lectures, assignments, and short (but frequent) exercises that will help you understand the mechanics of visual metaphor and rhetoric. You will become familiar with the core tenets of visual communication with particular emphasis on construction and mechanics of signs, images, and sequencing. You will be able to recognize, harness, and utilize graphic tools and strategies (such shifting scale, juxtaposition, editing, employing hierarchy, reordering, free-associating, and cropping) order to communicate information with clarity and precision. But most importantly, you will be asked to undo bad (i.e. lazy) seeing habits. You will be asked again and again to be critical about what you notice and to recalibrate your eye.

Note: Visual communication is often used synonymously with graphic design. Having a good command of graphic design skills can be useful for careers in editorial design, museum design, environmental design, publishing, title design, product design, branding, UI/UX, website design, among many others. It is not the aim of this course, however, to produce graphic designers or to build industry-ready portfolio pieces. This course is a highly process-oriented, exercise-driven class seeks ultimately to foster strong, self-sustaining visual instincts that can be applicable to any discipline moving forward.

Course Objectives
1. To gain an understanding of how we read, process, and use visual communication forms.
2. To gain familiarity and ease with different techniques that can create dynamic visual messages.
3. To recognize type as form.
4. To begin building a personal visual vocabulary.
5. To be introduced to various design methodologies.
6. To gain a greater appreciation for the fundamentals of communication design, from theoretical, historical and practical perspectives.

Required Materials
Adobe Illustrator
Adobe Photoshop
Adobe InDesign
A laptop
A smartphone
A digital image-capturing device (i.e. iPhone camera)

Course Structure
This studio relies heavily on in-class exercises and discussions (which also include critiques) that go on to inform these major assignments. Participation and effort in these areas given equal weight to the performance of the assignments. This studio will also ask you to keep a running image diary (format to be discussed on the first day) and encourage you to use the Open Studio Space for experimentation and feedback on non-assignment-related design projects.

Open Studio Space
This course will also be running an Open Studio Space on our class Slack that allows and encourages you to workshop design projects that fall outside of the assignments. If you have a poster for an event you need to make, or an invitation that you might want feedback on, or an idea for a commercial logo you’d like to test out, please use this space as an environment to test these visual ideas out in. I will go over the ethos behind this in the first class.

Classroom Culture + Critique
In a discipline like design, your background, references, interests, and worldviews are the most valuable thing that you are bringing to the table. No matter what stage of design education you are in, your impressions and responses are valid, important, and necessary. This studio course is a safe space.
where you should feel encouraged to voice these responses as readily as possible, and where critique is seen not as a site for judgement but as a site for practicing generosity.

Communication + Slack
You are expected to contribute openly and generously to discussions and critiques happening both in class and through Slack, which will be our main communication channel for announcements, references, and direct messages. My goal as an instructor is to act not as an authority figure but instead as a moderator for discussions and a cheerleader for your creative process. You should think of this environment as a community of peers and collaborators, and be looking to your peers for sources of inspiration and feedback.

Google Drive
We will be using Google Drive for submissions. Exercises and assignments must be submitted to the class drive no later than 8PM the night before class.

Class Resources
The MIT Writing and Communication Center, accessible online via mit.mywconline.com or on site at E18-233, 50 Ames Street.

Readings
Readings will be provided by me. (There is no need to go buy textbooks).

Attendance
Attendance is mandatory. Unexcused absences and tardiness may affect the final grade. Greater than two absences from studio without medical excuse supported by a doctor’s note or verifiable personal emergency could result in a failing grade for the studio. If there are any medical issues, personal emergencies, and special circumstances that impede the fulfillment of your academic obligations, please discuss them with me.

Grades
A Exceptionally good performance demonstrating a superior understanding of the subject matter, a foundation of extensive knowledge, and a skillful use of concepts and/or materials.
B Good performance demonstrating capacity to use the appropriate concepts, a good understanding of the subject matter, and an ability to handle the problems and materials encountered in the subject.
C Adequate performance demonstrating an adequate understanding of the subject matter, an ability to handle relatively simple problems.
D Minimally acceptable performance demonstrating at least partial familiarity with the subject matter and some capacity to deal with relatively simple problems.
F Failed. This grade also signifies that the student must repeat the subject to receive credit.

Grade Breakdown
The grade will be assigned based on the following three categories, which will be applied holistically across the components of the class (minus Open Studio Hours):
40% Participation and Engagement
30% Concept and Exploration of Ideas
30% Communication, Delivery, and Craft

Academic Integrity
MIT’s expectations and policies regarding academic integrity should be read carefully and adhered to diligently: http://integrity.mit.edu/

The Department of Architecture promotes a learning environment that supports the diverse values of the entire MIT community of students, faculty, administration, staff and guests. Fundamental to the mission of architectural education is the stewardship of this diversity in a positive and respectful learning environment that promotes the highest intellectual integrity and cultural literacy. As architectural design learning is often accomplished through project-based activities during and outside of class times, maintaining this environment at all times is the responsibility of the entire community. Faculty and students should strive to understand and mutually respect the varied commitments of each other and work together to manage expectations of time and effort devoted to assignments, pin-ups, and public reviews.
Week 1 (9/1, 9/3)
Introduction: What is Visual Communication?
Expressive Compositions

Week 2 (9/8, 9/10)
Symbolism & Gestalt
Object studies

Week 3 (9/15, 9/17)
Symbolism & Gestalt
Object studies and time

Week 4 (9/22, 9/24)
Gestalt & Typography
Exploring the shape of letters
Assignment 1 begins

Week 5 (9/29, 10/1)
Type
Exploring alphabets as systems of shapes

Week 6 (10/6, 10/8)
Typography
Exploring words, spacing, and hierarchy

Week 7 (10/13, 10/15)
Typography
Setting paragraphs

Week 8 (10/20, 10/22)
Typography
The relationship between typography and interface
Assignment 2 begins

Week 9 (10/27, 10/29)
Images
On drawing meaning out of images
Building an archive

Week 10 (11/3, 11/5)
Images in sequence
On drawing meaning out of images in sequence

Week 11 (11/10, 10/12)
Images and text
On the relationship between images and text
Assignment 3 begins

Week 12 (11/17, 11/19)
Images and text
On the relationship between images in sequence and text

Week 13 (11/24, Thanksgiving)
Unifying visual language
Self-generated images (vectors, diagrams, rasters)

Week 14 (12/1, 12/3)
Circulation

Week 15 (12/8)
Final Crit
Core Readings


John Kane, A Type Primer (2011), Introduction & Basics


Chris Marker, La Jetée (1963)