

4.053 Visual Communication Fundamentals (FA2021)

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TA: Lauren Gideonse (gideonse@mit.edu)
Writing Advisor: Andreas Karatsolis (karatsol@mit.edu)

Times: Tuesdays 9AM–12PM (in-person),
Thursdays 7PM–10PM (remote)
Office hours: By appt

Zoom ID: <https://mit.zoom.us/my/fundamentals>
Slack: <http://mit-4-053-2022fa.slack.com>

Course Description

This studio course provides an introduction to visual communication. Through readings, screenings, history lectures, assignments, and short exercises that draw from semiotic theory and practice, students will become familiar with the basic building blocks of visual communication—image and text—and the various ways they come together to make meaning. Students will learn and engage with various modes of representation in visual *and* written form, becoming familiar with core techniques and strategies in both. By the end of the class, students should have developed confidence in being clearer and more effective visual communicators, understanding how to generate and manipulate images and text to express their own ideas with confidence, clarity, and precision.

This is a CI-H class and features extensive writing as a core part of the curriculum. Significant class time will be dedicated to various forms of writing, including but not limited to: reading responses, close analyses and deconstructions, editing, ekphrasis, and free-writing.

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 meaningful visual messages.
3. To recognize type as form.
4. To decode and utilize images.
5. To begin building a personal visual vocabulary.
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)

Meetings

Tuesday morning sessions will be held in person, which will also be reserved for pin-up/review. Thursday evening sessions will be held remotely through Zoom, which will be recorded.

Course Structure

This course is made up of three (3) units—form, formal systems, and circulation. Each of these units contain an assignment that will contribute to the content of a final collection of work (an “exhibition”) with an accompanying poster and catalog (“book”). In-class exercises, lectures, and readings with accompanying discussions will inform aspects of these major assignments, but will also touch on topics that the assignments do not necessarily cover.

Participation and effort in these areas are 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).

Reading Responses

This course will assign eight (8) reading assignments that will each require 300-word reading responses. Reading responses must be posted on Google docs and discussed in class.

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

Image diary

Every Tuesday, students must submit one (1) image to the slack channel with an accompanying 50-word caption. At the end of the class, there should be 14 total.

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. 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.

Class Resources

This class is taught in collaboration with MIT's Writing, Rhetoric, and Professional Communication (WRAP) program, an academic program located within the Comparative Media Studies/Writing (CMS/W) department. In addition to the instruction provided by me and the course TA, students also have access to a writing advisor who will be available to help them throughout the course of the semester. This year's advisor is Andreas Karatsolis (karatsol@mit.edu).

The MIT Writing and Communication Center is also available to any MIT class. Appointments are accessible online via mit.mywconline.com or on site at E18-233, 50 Ames Street.

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory. Unexcused absences and tardiness may affect the final grade. Greater than two absences from studio without a 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:

40%	Participation and Engagement
30%	Concept and Exploration of Ideas
30%	Communication, Delivery, and Craft

Midterm grades will be provided.

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.

Course Schedule

Week 1 (9/8)

Introduction: What is Visual Communication?
Expressive Compositions
Begin Unit 1: Form and Images

Week 2 (9/13, 9/15)

Signs, Gestalt
Object studies

Week 3 (9/20, 9/22)

Translations, Forms of representation
Object studies

Week 4 (9/27, 9/29)

Forms of representation, Signs and meaning
End Unit 1 (presentation)

Week 5 (10/4, 10/6)

Collections
Exploring the shape of letters
Begin Unit 2: Systems of Form

Week 6 (NO CLASS, 10/13)

Exploring alphabets as systems of shapes
Type Anatomy

Week 7 (10/18, 10/20)

Exploring alphabets as shapes generated by systems
Type systems and responsivity

Week 8 (10/25, 10/27)

End Unit 2: Systems of Form (presentation)

Week 9 (11/1, 11/3)

Collections of images
Begin Unit 3: Circulation

Week 10 (11/8, 11/10)

Text that supports image
Type and Identity
Guest lecture: TBD

Week 11 (11/15, 11/17)

Text that complicates image
Introduction to typesetting

Week 12 (11/22, Thanksgiving)

Hierarchy and layout
Workshopping writing

Week 13 (11/29, 12/1)

Hierarchy and layout
Workshopping writing

Week 14 (12/6, 12/8)

Writing workshopping, layout finalizations

Week 15 (12/13)

Final class

Green = in-person

Orange = remote

Core Readings

Jurij Meden, *Scratches and Glitches* (2021). Austrian Film Museum

[“Film as an Object in Time, or Film Fermentation, Part 1”](#)

[“Film as an Object in Space, or Film Fermentation, Part II”](#)

Armin Hoffman, [Graphic Design Manual](#)

Bruno Munari, *Design as Art* (1966). London: Penguin Group

[“Two in One”](#)

Plato, [“Discussion of Writing”](#), Phaedrus, 274C–276A. Trans. by Alexander Nehemas and Paul Woodruff

Norton Jester, Selection from [The Phantom Tollbooth](#) (1961).

John Kane, *A Type Primer* (2011)

[Introduction & Basics](#)

[Development and Classification](#)

[Text](#)

[Columnar Organization](#)

[Grids](#)

Donald Knuth, [“The Concept of a MetaFont”](#). First published in *Visible Language*, Winter: 1982**

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1977)

[Episode 1](#)

Chris Marker, [La Jetée](#) (1963)

Hito Steryl, [In Defense of the Poor Image](#) (2009)

Beatrice Warde, [“The Crystal Goblet”](#) (1955)

Canal Street Research Association, [“PECUNIA NON OLET”](#). From *The Serving Library* Issue #17.

References / Secondary Readings

David Reinfurt, [“G-E-S-T-A-L-T”](#) (2019)

Roy R. Behrens, [“Art, Design, and Gestalt Theory”](#) (1998) in *Leonardo*, Vol. 31 No. 4

Bruno Munari, [Design as Art](#) (1966)

Bo-Won Keum, [“On the Letterform of the Age”](#) (2020).

Jost Hochuli, *Detail in Typography* (2008). London: Hyphen Press

[Basics, Letter, Word](#)

Michael Rock, [“Fuck Content”](#) (2009).

Dexter Sinister, [Style Guide for KADIST](#) (p. 31–42 of [the PDF](#))

Dexter Sinister, [“Letter and Spirit”](#) (2018).

Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, New York: Harper Collins

[Chapter 3](#)

Resources

[The People’s Graphic Design Archive](#)

[The Letterform Archive](#)

[Eye on Design](#)