

4.053 Visual Communication Fundamentals (FA2024)

Time M W 9AM–12PM

Location N52-337

Instructor Bo-Won Keum (bkeum@mit.edu)

Office hours T 10AM–12PM at 5-418

TA Thomas Logan King (tlkiing@mit.edu)

Office hours W 1–3pm at 3-415

Zoom <https://mit.zoom.us/my/fundamentals>

Slack <https://mit-4-053-2024fa.slack.com/>

Course Description

This studio course provides an introduction to visual communication. Through the deconstruction, analysis, and interpretation of various forms through techniques of abstraction, reduction, and reconstruction, students will become familiar with the basic building blocks of visual communication—image and text—and the various ways they can come together to make meaning. This will be supplemented by readings, screenings, history lectures, assignments, and short exercises that draw from semiotic theory and practice. Students will also learn how to recognize, harness, and utilize graphic tools and strategies, such as shifting scale, juxtaposition, editing, employing hierarchy, reordering, free-associating, and cropping, in order to communicate and develop visual ideas with clarity and precision. This should serve as a foundation with which to develop a visual methodology used to build other forms of communication design practice.

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 decode and utilize images.
4. To recognize type as form.
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 digital image-capturing device (i.e. iPhone camera)

X-acto blade (*provided*)

Cutting mat (*provided*)

Straight-edge ruler (*provided*)

Course Structure

This course is made up of three (3) units: the basics of visual language; objects as forms and images; and type as form, object, trace, and system. 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. There will be one final assignment that will result in a designed and printed object.

Pin-Up

A “pin-up”, short for “pinning up work”, refers broadly to a presentation format that we will engage in regularly to examine and discuss each other’s work. Physical pin-ups will utilize the wall space of the classroom and will require physical print-outs of the deliverables. Pin-ups may also be in digital format and will be noted. The discussions that follow will take on a variety of formats and styles.

File Organization

This class will ask for a lot of submissions and require you to be very organized about your classwork. This is an essential skill. We will discuss this in the second week.

Communication

Our inboxes get filled up pretty quickly during the semester, so we will communicate instead through Slack. Join our workspace [here](#).

Readings

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

Craft protocol/etiquette

Do not save things for the last minute. Printing takes time, especially at MIT. You must also print things with time to trim.

Printing

This class will often require you to bring printed and trimmed studies to class. There is a big printer on the third floor of N52 that requires a USB stick — please avoid swarming that printer before class time, as the attendance policy will not accommodate tardiness.

Class Resources

The Rotch Library has a fantastic collection of design periodicals and textbooks.

The MIT List Center also holds an extremely impressive collection of contemporary artwork by many artists, designers, and visual thinkers who will be cited frequently in this class. (Please catch the current display that features 500 out of 700 works in the collection.)

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 for all sessions. Because this studio course relies on lectures, exercises, and assignments that build on one another in lock-step, full in-person participation and attendance is required.

- Greater than three instances of excessive tardiness will result in the deduction of a full letter of your final grade.
- Greater than three absences from the studio without a medical excuse supported by a doctor's note or verifiable personal emergency will result in a failing grade.
- Late submissions will not be accepted.

If there are any medical issues, personal emergencies, and special circumstances that impede the fulfillment of your academic obligations, please discuss them with me and Logan.

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:

- 40% Critical Thinking and Experimentation
- 30% Delivery and Craft
- 30% Participation and Engagement

These grades will be applied holistically across the components of the class.

- 30% Exercises
- 30% Assignment 1 and 2
- 30% Final Assignment

with the exception of the Image Bank exercises, will be marked based on completion.

- 10% Image Feed

Midterm grades will be provided.

Classroom Culture and Critique

In a discipline especially like design, our individual backgrounds, references, interests, and worldviews are the most valuable things that we can bring to the table. They are what form our intuitions, which are what guide our decision-making. Thus, it is important to enter the studio knowing that our impressions and responses are valid, important, and necessary. Every way of perceiving and reading a designed object is a useful data point; sharing them is the most generous thing we can do to ourselves and our peers. This studio course is a safe space where we should feel encouraged to voice these responses as readily as possible, and where critique is seen not as a site for judgment but as a site for sharing perspective.

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 Timeline

1	Intro	Sept			04	Introduction	
2	Unit 1 The Basics of Visual Language		09	Visual Basics <i>Image Feed</i> Exercise: Abstract studies	11	Visual Basics Exercise pin-up Exercise: Abstract compositions	
3			16	Gestalt <i>Image Feed</i> Exercise pin-up	18	Gestalt Exercise: Color Studies	
4			23	Object Study <i>Image Feed</i> Object study and discussion Exercise: Line drawings	25	Object Study, Light and Shadow Lesson: Vectorizing Exercise: Vectorizing	
5	Unit 2 Objects as Forms and Images		30	Object Study, Light and Shadow <i>Image Feed</i> Exercise review Exercise: We make forms using... <i>surprise!</i>	02	Object Study, Translations Assignment 1: Object Print begins	
6			Oct	07	Object Study, Translations <i>Image Feed</i> Review prints	09	Object Study, Translations Assignment 1: Object Print due
7	Unit 3 Type as Form, Object, Trace, and System	Oct	14	NO CLASS	16	Type as Form Exercise: Make letters using... <i>surprise!</i>	
8			21	Type as Object <i>Image Feed</i> Exercise: Finding letters in the wild Assignment 2A: Object as Alphabet begins	23	Type as Object Assignment 2A pin-up and progress	
9			28	Type as Object <i>Image Feed</i> Assignment 2A: Object as Alphabet due Assignment 2B: Object as Alphabetting Tool begins	30	HOLD FOR FIELD TRIP (ICA)	
10			Nov	04	Type as Trace <i>Image Feed</i> Assignment 2B: Object as Alphabetting Tool due	06	HOLD FOR FIELD TRIP (Somerville) Final assignment begins
11			11	NO CLASS	13	Type as System Review Final Assignment ideas	
12			18	Typography as System <i>Image Feed</i> Final Assignment draft 1 Review type hierarchies	20	Typography as System Final Assignment progress Review type tone	

13			25	Typography as System <i>Image Feed</i> Final Assignment draft 2	27	Typography as System Working session
14		Dec	02	Typography as System <i>Image Feed</i> Final Assignment draft 3	04	Typography as System Working session
15			09	Typography as System <i>Image Feed</i> Production and final preparation	11	FINAL REVIEW / WRAP-UP <i>Assignment 3 due</i>

Readings and Materials

Armin Hoffman, [Graphic Design Manual](#) (1965). Basel: Niggli Editions.

Bruno Munari, [Design as Art](#) (1966). London: Penguin Group.

[“Two in One”](#)

Bruno Munari, Selections from [Good Design](#) (1963). Mantova: Corraini.

Cyrus Highsmith, *Inside Paragraphs: Typographic Fundamentals* (2010). Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press.

A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff tr., excerpt from “Discussion of Writing” from Plato: Phaedrus. Translated, with Introduction and Notes. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995): 274b–277a. [PDF](#)

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”](#)

John Kane, *A Type Primer* (2011)

[Introduction & Basics*](#)

[Development and Classification*](#)

[Letter*](#)

[Text*](#)

[Columnar Organization](#)

[Grids](#)

[Page Proportions](#)

Josef Müller-Brockmann, 1981, *Grid Systems in Graphic Design*

[1](#) and [2](#) (Full [here.](#))

Extra References and Resources

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

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

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

[Basics](#), [Letter](#), [Word](#)

Lazlo Maholy-Nagy, Selections from *Vision in Motion*

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

Extra Resources

Websites

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

[The Letterform Archive](#)

[Typographica](#)

Places

[Katherine Small Gallery](#)

[Harvard Art Museum](#)

[MIT List Center](#)

[MIT Museum](#)

[ICA Boston](#)

[Boston Art Book Fair \(canceled 2024\)](#)

[Multiple Formats](#) at Boston University