

OBSERVATION: LISTEN WITH OUR EYES AND LOOK WITH OUR EARS

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ABSTRACT

Design ethnography and design thinking stress the importance of thoughtful and considered observation. Observational engagement goes far beyond simply witnessing; active observation promotes awareness and curiosity through engaged ‘seeing.’ The observational viewer builds greater insight into empathy, place, social setting, both overtly and subtly. Establishing the power of observation can start with first year design students. This paper suggests that challenging design students in their first year undergraduate (Foundations) study to engage in site-based observational recording (written and visual) promotes insight, awareness, and self-empowerment for a creative response. This paper establishes the need for thoughtful ‘seeing’ that challenges preconceptions through multi-sensory experience that is employed in a Foundations student project with three case studies. Foundations students worked in a location of their choice, noticing formal characteristics, daily phenomena, and personal fascinations, and creatively responding to these. Asking a student to work in an everyday setting outside a classroom promotes site ownership and independent empowerment. While the student observation and response project exemplified was not problem based, it initiates core principles of design methodologies.

Keywords: Observation, Site, Foundations, Research

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper poses the question “How can the Foundation year observational studies set the stage for design ethnography?” The act of observation plays a critical role across numerous fields, such as the sciences, engineering, humanities, but significantly in the creative arts. To observe is to ‘pay attention to’ or ‘notice’ (Oxford English Dictionary) as a personal first-hand immersive experience providing for discovery and inspiration with potential for meaningful advancements, reconsiderations, and creative output. Within the arts, observation can motivate personal expression or provide for user-based problem solving in the design disciplines. When practiced as a multi-sensory experience, key insights and inspiration can arise from the characteristics of observed movement, time of day, or emotional states expressed by the user. Developing a keen observational awareness or ‘seeing’ plays a fundamental role not only as a research tool for making designs insightful, but also to drive creative play. The field of Industrial Design stresses the importance of observational fieldwork known as ‘Design Ethnography’ as playing a vital aspect in generating an understanding of user-based habits and needs. While observational drawing is a staple of Foundations curriculum, drawing in an everyday setting primarily records formal characteristics and is often unable to include considerations of movement, mood, sounds, or dynamic changes. The need to ‘listen with our eyes and look with our ears’ is a challenge to look beyond preconceptions and to employ a greater depth of observation beyond formal characteristics.

2 COURSE AND PROJECT

The author’s project titled ‘Observation and Installation’ was delivered in 3D Design in 2013. The 3D Design course is part of a Foundation Studio class set in the first year of undergraduate program, typically accompanied by 2D Design, and Drawing. The German Bauhaus School of the 1920s originally proposed the Foundations program in the burgeoning design field by employing simple observational objectivity as part of its materials-based visual studies [1]. The author’s 3D Design course is a required class comprised of approximately twenty students per section from majors primarily in design, but also in the fine art and craft fields. Each student must create a journal

consisting of a series of ‘seeing’-based observations over a few weeks, and then create a response installation in the space observed. The project asks students to select an everyday location, a ‘site’ to spend time with recording observations, both written and visual, in a traditional bound journal. Journal entries occur at different times of days using descriptive words noting overt formal conditions, subtleties, and changes much like observational fieldwork. Stress is placed on drawing visual parallels and noting repetitions over time. The visuals may be as simple as comparing rectilinear forms in the foreground and background, or the repeated paths of people walking that may compare to the lines of trees. Students are also encouraged to discover personal fascinations. Installations are completed on site and photographed with images presented in the classroom.

The project takes advantage of everyday technology of cellular phone cameras for photographing final images and concept proposals. Conversely, the project dispenses with technology for recording still images, video or sound recordings as these are not conducive to immersion. Immersion through traditional journaling forces students to think critically and expressively by putting words to sounds, engaging in observational drawing, and considering how to record time, mood, and movement. The availability of digital technology to record on-site is often a barrier for being present, since one concentrates on the technology and not being present ‘seeing’ the site.

3 SEEING

The act of “seeing” is a heightened sense of engagement beyond that of just looking. Seeing suggests a viewer’s appreciation of everyday events, environments, or objects, finding poetry in material others would find banal, ubiquitous or unimpressive. This heightened appreciation is an awareness that comes from an openness of mind, an interest beyond preconceptions. As George Nelson, the former Director of Design at Herman Miller, states: “We see what we have been trained to see by habit or tradition. The notion that we come upon a scene and see everything has no truth to it” [2].

The “habit or traditions” that Nelson refers to are in effect cognitive blinders, personal and/or societal, of the viewer’s awareness. While his example refers primarily to visual awareness, Nelson’s call to appreciation extends to Henri Lefebvre’s writings on the social existence of space, suggesting that images receive a higher preference over other senses; in turn we become repressively visualized. Lefebvre states, “In the course of the process whereby the visual gains the upper hand over the other senses, all impressions derived from taste, smell, touch and even hearing first lose clarity, then fade away altogether” [3].

Without preference to the visual; the visual and the auditory can comeingle, affording as the title suggests ‘Looking with our eyes and seeing with our ears.’ This state draws in a more experiential awareness, not just ‘viewing’ but allowing senses to combine to generate impressions that change throughout the day(s), affecting mood, or even resulting in dynamic changes. Sound can be beguiling, provoking interest in who or what made the sound, even evoking fear and wonder [3].

4 OBSERVATIONAL DRAWING

Direct observation or ‘drawing from life’ is an essential goal of a typical Foundations Drawing course. Observational drawing attunes students to capturing shadows, objects from different angles, light falling on glass, etc. These skills afford the student the ability to begin to visualize in the mind [4]. Direct observation primarily deals with capturing realism through recognition of values, perspective, and textures, and through techniques such as gesture lines, stippling, or blotting. A student spending time looking at an object or an environment and then drawing it experiences an appreciation of the proportions, shapes, depth, and details that visually communicate to the viewer. Recording through drawing can transform individual perceptions into a communication tool of social understanding. [2] Communication skills are not just elemental but also essential, and when put to work can create stunning and thoughtful recordings of the physical world. Essential design drawing textbooks such as Francis Ching’s *Design Drawing* suggests that observation is recording the present, expanding memories of the past, while stimulating imagination for the future [5]. This expressive act of recording is an act of interpretation. What a student chooses to draw, how they choose to draw it, and how we as the audience interpret it are vital considerations for drawing as an expressive form. Yet recording through drawing can be limited during the Foundations program, and while expressive compositionally, it often just cannot account for a more robust sensory phenomena that true ‘seeing’ does.

5 JOURNALING

The author's student project begins with selecting a site. Students are asked to find an everyday location that they will observe and spend time recording in a journal. Students select a site that is distinct from their daily routine, one that they will visit over a period of weeks at differing times of day. The location is a personal choice, anything from a stairway, foyer, courtyard, or location in the woods. The journals are recorded on traditional paper or sketch pad, offering a place to freewrite and sketch observations. The goal is for students to engage a mundane setting to find them in a state of immersion, to make discoveries in a setting that seemingly offers nothing. Immersion is a state of mental focus that attempts to lose the real world in a feeling of satisfaction and joy [6]. As the paper title, "Listen with our eyes and look with our ears," suggests, good journaling accounts for mingling of senses not strictly visual. Using observations, students write and sketch, sensitizing themselves to what they see and hear, noting formal qualities, movements, changes, details and moods of each site. The journals have no prescribed format and students are encouraged to write in sentences or as single word lists, or to spend time sketching with details or just light-heartedly. The goal is 'seeing,' so the more personal and experimental the journal, the more the potential for immersion rises. A single entry may take fifteen minutes or an hour depending on the student's schedule or level of interest at a given moment. Like the work of an ethnographer, journaling is to be performed with an open mind, allowing for both expected and unexpected observations. Journaling may include observations of people in a space, documentation of what has happened, or noting the impact of weather. Like ethnography, journaling is not intended to engage or intervene but to find awareness and to engender curiosity.

As students begin journaling they often feel intimidated at the public nature of their chosen site.

Sitting with a journal in a stairwell or the entrance to a library can make for awkward social encounters. This feeling of inappropriateness is an obstacle to immersion that also affects the duration and content of initial observations. The nature of 'seeing' is such that one becomes aware that they too can also be seen. This reciprocal nature of vision where one is seeing and being seen is more fundamental than verbal dialogue [7]. However, situating one in a public setting and taking ownership offers tremendous empowerment. For the student there is great mental safety in the context of a classroom, the halls of a college department, or the personal desk of their living quarters. The ownership of a public site takes place as students mentally shift from awkward uncertainty in initial journaling to resolved immersion after subsequent visits. If questioned by acquaintances during their later journaling stays, students report pleasure being able to share their purpose and insights.

The student project flips from hands-off observer journaling to hands-on art making of an installation at the site to conclude the project. These large-scale temporary installations require a bold sense of ownership of the site. Installations may take hours to complete and not uncommonly students recruit friends to assist in the work. Ownership is at its height during site installation when students are questioned by curious strangers. There is often a reported sense of pride in explaining their purpose and concept.

6 SITE

The student project described utilizes real-world and real-time experiences through site journaling. Site-based work, more familiar in fields such as architecture or sculpture, derives from the conditions of a specific locale. The work produced is referred to as 'conditional,' meaning it is influenced by the circumstances of the site. Site-based work looks to the dynamics of a place and acts in response to what is actively observed there, a process referred to as "determining relations" or the conditions of circumstance [8]. Similarly, site-based work proposes an 'art-response' to judgments arrived at intimate hands-on reading through sitting, watching and walking through the site.

7 DESIGN ETHNOGRAPHY

Research in Industrial Design known as design ethnography came into prominence in the 1990s. The ethnographic approach of observational fieldwork, appreciating the 'real world in real time' was initiated to address computers in the workplace. Looking at the context of products and users at work generates a depth of understanding by the designer who had not previously considered social relationships. This first-hand experience fieldwork sheds light on social scenarios and environmental influences surrounding product use, supplying the designer with information to inform an analytic perspective. Observing a person using a product generates insights into the struggles and opportunities

of a design or scenario with which the designer is tasked. Often the problems or opportunities are unable to be identified by the user but can be observed by the designer, who as an ordinary member of society acts as a sociologist. Recording this is a matter of “getting down on the shop floor, immersing yourself in the work, and learn through first hand experience” [9]. Assembling the record can be achieved through a variety of means such as field notes, diagrams, photographs, and video. Insight of this manner optimally engages the designer by sensitizing them as ethnographers to ubiquitous features. These ‘user observations’ are best performed by observing without intervening in the user workplace, instilling the designer with both expected and unexpected situations and use realities. The unexpected is only discovered if the designer enters with an open mind and is keen on subtleties (van Boeijen et al). Ethnographers can place a prototype into the workplace setting to consider its effectiveness. The insight of user observations should take into consideration users knowing that they are being observed and therefore that they may behave differently than they would normally.

8 CASE STUDIES

The studies below are representations of the project titled “Observation & Installation” from the author’s first-year Foundations 3D Design class. The project was delivered in two sections with thirty-eight participants in the ninth week of the first semester.

8.1 Tanya

Tanya observed a public bench in a quad a few minutes walk from her dormitory. Her observations include notations of leaves on the ground changing colours, how the breeze is so soundless “it’s almost as if the breeze would be interrupting if it made a sound any louder,” and her excitement of a leaf stuck in the gap between slats of a bench that she took a particular interest in. She recorded sounds of laughter in the distance, “soft rain,” and “feet moving on the pavement,” and spent time drawing shadows.

In writing about her visual and auditory experiences she used words employing alternative senses. Visual observations in an environment can leap to auditory descriptive words such as ‘noisy,’ while other words with visuals would be described as ‘brown’ sounds or ‘fuzzy’ smells. These overlaps suggest a poetic appreciation for seeing a place or object. Revisiting a setting over time can allow one to see dynamic changes in movements, sounds, and moods. These changes lend a greater depth of understanding through subtle or dramatic differences.

Tanya noted the number of cigarettes on the ground at each visit’ she timed and speculated on the duration of smokers sitting according to the temperature changes. These observations and interests are in keeping with design ethnography. She also noted the “beautiful story” told by the wear on the bench planks. Her creative response was to construct a human-scale cigarette placed on the bench inspired by noting the similarity between the folds of the crushed filter to the folds of a seated woman’s skirt. (see Figure 1)



Figure 1. Installation : Tanya

8.2 Jocelyn

Jocelyn observed a women’s dormitory bathroom. Her observations included the frequency of the cleaning staff visits, the scents left from beauty products, bleach, and the affects of moisture. She

charted diagrams of colours and counted their use. She became interested in shower use: “I think it would be interesting to see how people’s shower habits change when they have less time.”

Jocelyn’s proposition is akin to a design ethnographer’s placement of a prototype into the workplace setting to consider how it affects work habits. When ethnographers observe prototypes inserted in the workplace must take into consideration users knowing they are being observed and possibly behaving differently than they would normally. This method is best complemented by acknowledging the user as expert. Users are often unable to identify the issues, problems, or limitations with the products that they use frequently. Use of ‘context mapping’ asks the user to do homework activities that empowers them to provide insight on their experiences through subsequent group session interviews [10].

Jocelyn did not attempt to alter the showering habits, but her speculation is in keeping with inserting a prototype. She noted many conditions such as the difficulty to determine time of day without windows, and keenly noticed the frequently colours of the bars of soap were being used (and left behind), matching the palette of the floor tiles. Her response installation was to make a set of tiles the same schedule and size on the floor out of corresponding bar soaps. The tiles she made were then attached in a band to the shower, appearing like a true set of tiles.

8.3 Damian

Damian observed a public tunnel below an academic building. He sat where an intersection of two tunnels merged. Damian noted the colours, the affect of light on the colours, and the absence of anything that was organic. He observed that every surface had the presence of texture: “the ground...is made out of brick that is also made out of tiny specks of light that reflects less of the white side than the orange side.” He watched how people moved and reacted at the corner intersection. He became fascinated with the form of a corner as a condition of the wall being three dimensional, stating “Every corner has a force.” He began to write in the manner of a manifesto about corners: “a circle is opposite of a corner since it is made of zero corners or possibly a million corners.” For his installation Damian made a set of circles constructed in paper that lay as a pattern on the floor radiating from the corner of the wall.

Research ethnography considers the ‘site’ of a workplace as a unique conditional factor to the success of a product. In the case of Damian’s project, site-specific work is conceived with the site as an integral element to its success. Site-specific work is integrated into the surroundings through a process of recognition and understanding. Damian was able to recognize the banal corner as a “force.” Ethnography must examine banal everyday conditions and find inspiration in these.

9 CONCLUSION

The project “Observation and Installation” enabled students to immerse themselves in an everyday public site outside of the classroom, immersing them and taking ownership. Although this project is not directly geared at ‘user observations’ as with design research, both share the realities of the expected and unexpected of direct site observation. Both require insertion into uncontrolled environments and taking ownership in order to find opportunities and spark creative responses. Ethnographers, like these students, practice immersion on-site, and through their observations of mundane settings and the practice of ‘getting down on the shop floor’ look for reoccurrences and seek inspiration.

Concept generation across the two class sections was generally strong, suggesting that on-site response was successful. Embracing the observed conditions as ‘seeing’ transcends preconceived concepts.

In the project critique students expressed great empowerment by taking ownership of a site that occurred in their repeated visits, exhibiting pride in their journals and even recruiting friends to assist in their installations. While the journals gave students pride, they often stated ‘everything is the same.’ This statement, while discouraging, validates that students need to build observational sensitivity and therefore pedagogical practice should emphasize the use of observation at early stages. This paper’s title suggests that the undertaking not be biased toward the visual, yet the final project deliverables in printed images from cell phones makes the visual take precedence. Considerations of how to incorporate sound, mood, and movement should be incorporated, since the project does not allow experiencing the installation first-hand.

Shared outcomes of the student observations to design ethnography:

- Learning to value open-minded expectations
- Sensitization to the mundane and ubiquitous

- Use of observational recording
- Observing the actions/habits of people in an environment
- Empowerment of observer outside of routine environments
- Finding opportunities for creative response into workplace/site

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