

## Seeing Multiples

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James Elkins calculates that it took him a cumulative total of almost 3 years to see Mondrian's *Lozenge Composition with Yellow, Black, Blue, Red, and Gray* – a painting that, as an art historian, he was quite familiar with before beginning his exercise in looking. He writes, 'I want to gently undermine the idea that there's nothing to be said about seeing because it's easy, automatic, and natural' (Elkins, 2010). For Elkins, seeing the Mondrian required both a commitment to an extended period of study and a willingness to un-know his educated biases concerning the work. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger (2008) further argues seeing can never be separated from what we know or what we believe. What we see is contextual, cultural, situational, and open to change. Assumptions and preconceptions must give way to the construction of multiple and co-evolving vantage points – constellations over singular instances of inquiry. For the foundation design student, seeing means both sitting within their diversity of life experiences, and also leaping headfirst into strange new landscapes of disciplinary limits and possibilities.

The Design Foundations Studio at Kent State University's College of Architecture and Environmental Design uses reciprocal experiments in making to uncover the generative potential in extended exercises in seeing. The 2-semester sequence is framed as a single exercise comprised of a series of co-evolving parts. Beginning with something/someone/someplace familiar, the student is asked to gain a new familiarity through sustained interrogation and looking through an unfamiliar lens. No single media or means of inquiry is given preference. The goal is simply to notice what they hadn't before.

A series of sketches made with a pen grasped with a strange or even uncomfortable grip are used to reveal the hidden internal structure, logic, or character of a familiar or favorite personal article. Shifting the frame of reference, quick gestural sketches of a single object slow into considered photographic observations of an object in context. Fragments of daily rituals become modes for understanding the inherent qualities and potentials of ubiquitous objects and situations. By taking time to notice the things that they may pass by, the compositional elements of design are repositioned as accessible, personal, and ripe with meaning. Meaning that can itself be played with and transformed through recontextualization of frame, position, proximity.



Figure 1 Framing. Caleb O'Bryon

The relationship between figure (a positive form and object of focus) and ground (everything that is not the figure) as oppositional elements is called into question. The paper ground or margins between the edges of two photographic images is repeatedly reframed. A (potentially infinite) series of new compositions are produced from the singular object. Looking more closely reveals visual tension, play between instability and balance, and expressively ambiguous boundaries. As Elkins' uncovered through active looking – engaging in meticulous attempts to physically reproduce the subtly shifting territories at the blown up margins of Mondrian's *Lozenge Composition with Yellow, Black, Blue, Red, and Gray* – the studio contests the definition of any object or image as fixed/absolute.



Figure 2 Media and Materiality. Caleb O'Bryon

Moving from the single, to multiple and back again, figure/ground is taken to new depths and meaning through an exploration of material and spatial affect. Four distinct medias and techniques are introduced: drafting pencil into point/line network space (iterative and modulated sequences, traces, overlaps, repeats, etc); multi-tonal paper collage into line/plane surface space (cutting, tearing, layering, splicing, juxtaposing, contrast, etc); charcoal and kneaded/eraser into plane/mass carved, solid space (gradient or sharp contrast of dark to light, texture); ink wash into ambient surface space (layering, masking, blotting, stippling, resisting, etc). Susan Rothenberg's ongoing study of the body of a horse – its contours, mass, and position fluidly altered by shifts in media, material, and technique imply a new way to think about the ubiquitous art school gesture, Different than a sketch, which implies imprecision, the art theorist Nicolaides (1941) explains that a gesture is formed through the quick but focused study of a thing.

*The quick sketches made by most students are exactly what they are called – quick sketches – which to my way of thinking is very bad practice. The word 'sketch' suggests something that is not completed. Quick studies, on the contrary, should indicate that there has been real study and a completion of the thing studied, representing a certain kind of concentration... Quick sketches are often used simply to 'loosen up' the student and not as a means of penetrating study. Often students do them well and are quite surprised at the results, which are far beyond any knowledge they have. The reason is that by working quickly they accidentally find the gesture. The gesture is a feeler which reaches out and guides them to knowledge (p.29).*

Likewise, our students move with swift consideration through an iterative rethinking of their original idea. Beyond the ability to construct original two-dimensional compositions with basic compositional vocabularies and principles, they gain insight into the generative potential of different medias, materials, and ways of making. The exercise is repeated in color and then constructed in relief through a directed focus on techniques folding, layering, and carving. Made entirely of white museum board and foam core, the relief is not solely about the direct application of color or material, but is instead about the translation of conditions of color, composition, line, value, texture, and space discovered in selected two-dimensional media into a monochromatic three-dimensional artifact.

From multiplied gesture to multiplied object, students return to a singular figure/ground composition reframed as motif and repeated to form pattern where the previous single-sided planar relief defined by consistency of surface and connection expand to become a range of thicknesses, intensities, and material situations. The compositions must illustrate the concept of 'drop' and should also consider rotation, scaling, and/or changing of positive/negative form. The performative role of these devices are tested by the construction of three-dimensional pattern models with an emphasis on not just the 'what's' but the 'how's' of making. In other words, as pattern is defined as the arrangement of forms into a new whole, the development of a technique for producing the pattern as a complete compositional structure must be distinct from the technique used for producing the individual cellular motif.



Figure 3 Pattern Studies. Caleb O'Bryon

Adding movement from drawing media to modeling media and back again – the student makes and remakes with a focus on the discovery of unique strategies and techniques for seeing. As they work to translate their observations, the process becomes an immersion into varied techniques of making delimited by their own newly discovered sets of material logics and limits. The first part of this exercise looks at transformation. Reflecting on the process of making his *Transcripts*, Bernard Tschumi (1995) introduces transformation as a device for intensification of an idea:

*Any work on autonomous forms (as opposed to forms that claim to be the consequence of functional or material constraints) requires the conscious use of devices (if it is not to fall into self-indulgent arbitrariness). Devices permit the extreme formal manipulation of the sequence, for the content of congenial frames can be classified according to formal strategies such as repetition, superposition, distortion, 'dissolve' and insertion. All transformational devices can apply equally and independently to spaces, events, or movements (p.103-104).*

Extending a tracery of construction lines from left to right and right to left, the resulting sequences can be seen as both iterative, frame-by-frame morphological transformations and also fluid compositional wholes comprised of seven parts. The exercise is intended as both a continued exploration of basic compositional tactics (visual tension and continuity) and an introduction to narrative experience framed by strange mashups and Tschumi's additive coupling.

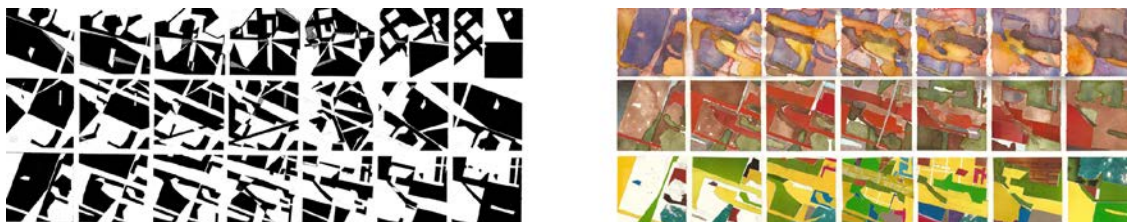
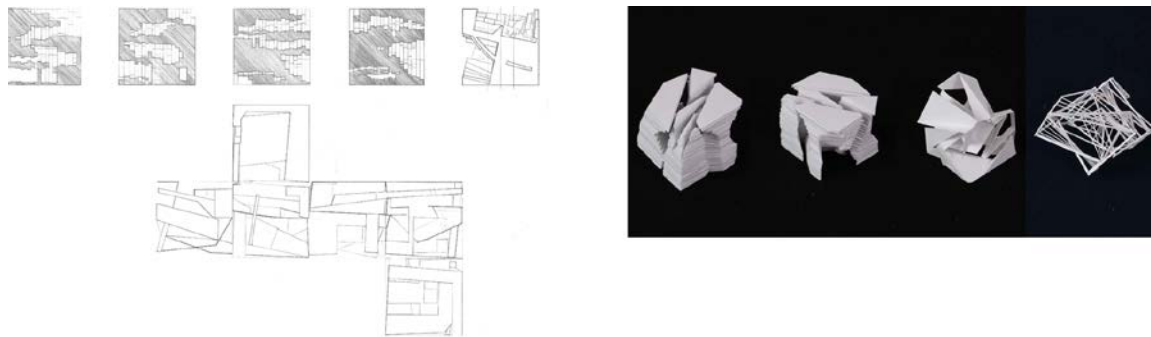


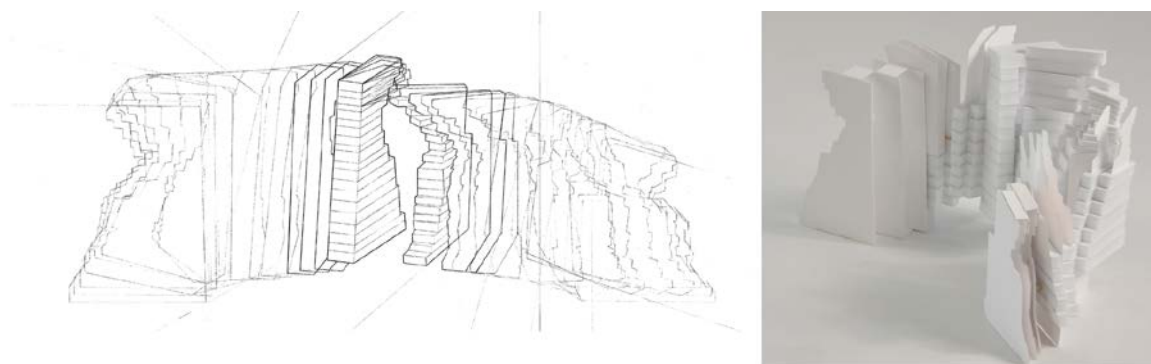
Figure 4 Compositional Transformation. Caleb O'Bryon

Read as iterative frames, the transformation becomes a set of serial sections – orthographic instructions for the production of a solid/carved cubic object; Read instead as a fluid whole, the transformation is an unfolded elevation – orthographic instructions for the production of 4 adjacent sides of a planar/surface cube. Finally, students look closely at their completed solid and surface cubes – identifying salient characteristic in order to translate the spatial and material logic of each into point and line. This process of translation allows a reflection back to the original two-dimensional experiments in media and materiality while also projecting forward to more complex three-dimensional variations in density, directionality, mass, solid/void, and opacity/transparency – blurring or making more ambiguous the boundaries of the finite cubic domain.



*Figure 5 Surface, Solid, Line Cubes. Bethany Wallace*

From finite to infinite, the cube is again reimagined as a structure that moves, expresses, and defines space. Considering the semester's work with new insight, three prior objects or images are selected for their value as individual artifacts and collectively as interrelated abstract formal, spatial, or material ideas for framing a new (kinematic) provocation or interface – a 'point of contact', 'surface', or 'dialogue' between two things (Porter, 2013: p.80). Similarly, the exercise serves as a point of reflection and a way to move forward through occupying, amplifying, and propagating the space between artifacts and ideas. The kinematic drawings explore the simultaneous displacement and serial transformation of an interface construct through an image field. The particular character of motion (floating/flying, bouncing, swinging, etc) as well as rhythm, frequency, fluidity, and speed of movement and change are manipulated and adjusted through careful consideration of the individual's semester work.



*Figure 6 Kinematic Study. Trisha Kreydt*

While traditional architectural graphics are utilized to represent a still, static object, the kinematic drawing serves as a multi-relational study of controlled change over time. Drawings employ sequential

or multiple image-elements, overlap, scaling, change of axial direction (rotation), and change in state as a means to develop physical or perceived movement through the two-dimensional space of the drawing surface. Translation of adjacencies, layers, and overlaps in drawing into a three-dimensional visually kinetic construct introduces the concepts of joint, seam, connection, and structural performance. New devices for operating are invented and tested and the clearly articulated materials, methods, and spatial limits of the semester's work is opened to negotiation and debate.

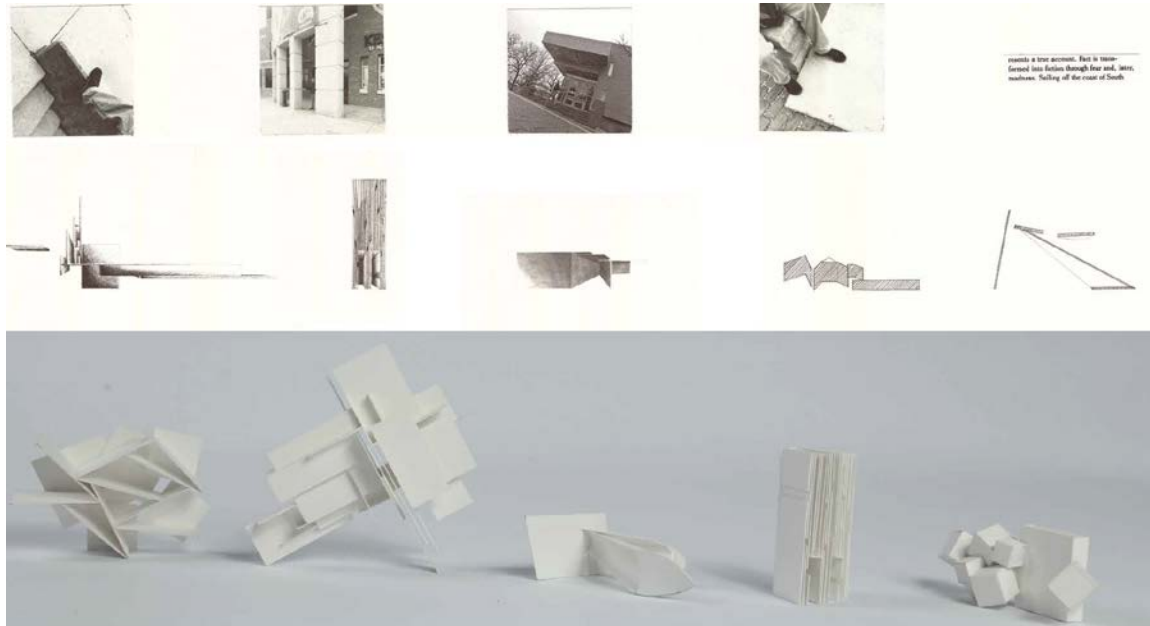


Figure 7 Surveying Threshold. Joshua Meyers

At the beginning of the second semester, students return again to the fragments of their daily rituals collected at the beginning of the first semester – re-photographing, framing and analyzing these situations now as thresholds. The technical and media driven focus of the fall gives way to a tighter theoretical framework and a physical and metaphysical sense of body. They are asked to recognize and survey the role of threshold as a tangible/intangible moment that delineates outside from in – to consider “threshold” as a layered and gradual transition toward interiority over a singularly defined formal entity.



Figure 8 Surveying Threshold. J.J. Bonezzi

In painting, Fernand Khnopff imagines threshold as both a literal frame, and also a symbolic network of loosely overlapping and ephemeral figures. Similarly, the student is asked to see him or herself occupying the place where thresholds (windows, doors, walls, apertures, etc) become territories (rooms, enclosures, clearings, etc) for aloneness and solitude. Considering the postures, actions, and behaviors they associate with escape from everyday life, a diverse range of voices are presented and studied – from Thoreau’s retreat into the natural world of Walden to Rilke’s introspective advice to a young poet. Turning again to painting, Richard Diebenkorn’s *Ocean Park Series* is also investigated. Diebenkorn’s twenty-five year meditation on the structure and accumulation of layers through an exhaustive process of making and re-making is certainly another kind of escape. The *Ocean Park Series* also allows students to see the device driven formal, material, and compositional experiments from first semester from a fresh vantage point - an image’s potential to implicate the body and, in so doing, construct new meaning. Ian McKeever (2015) writes:

*The paintings in the ‘Ocean Park’ series do have a flatness to them, as has all his work, yet at the same time the space in them is finely nuanced, oscillating between the sensation of looking down, as in an aerial view, while at the same time looking straight ahead, suggesting a doorway, a space we can enter (p.50).*

While the series is both visually indicative of architectonic bodies in its allusion to windows, doors, and thresholds, the works also carries a trace of the physical body of the artist/maker (the extents of his height and reach) and the physical spatial limits of his studio work space. Synthesizing this research, their self-interrogation on solitude and analysis of threshold, students make material assemblies at 1’=3/4” scale focusing on the production of territories through the articulation of materiality, light, texture, and detail. Simultaneously, plan and plan oblique are used to describe the spatial and material organizations of the territory for escape and, in particular, how the students has chosen to accommodate the postures and behaviors they associate with escape. Planning is emphasized not as a static representation of the current state of material assembly, but instead as a dynamic tool for the generation of new and refined design intentions. In specific students are ask to consider the resolution or articulation of details that were not suited for study in physical model due to limits in material performance or their expertise as a maker.

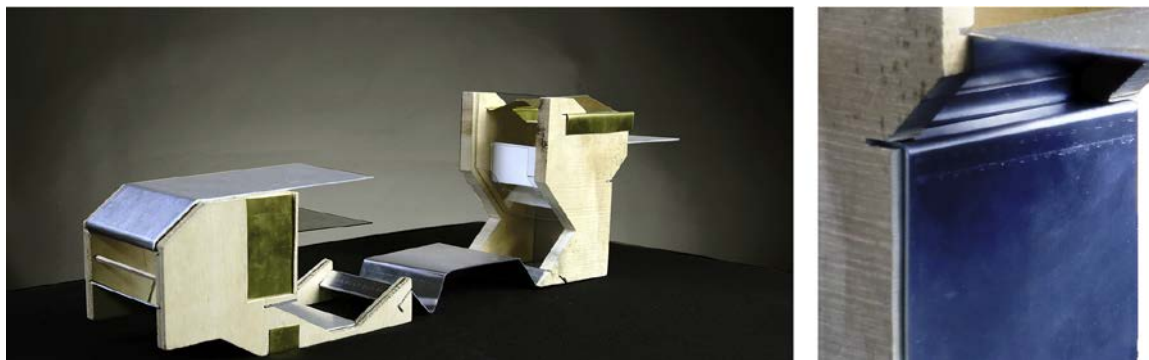


Figure 9 Territories and Assemblies. Kelly Daugherty

From mine to yours, a protagonist (or co-conspirator) is invented to share their escape – modifying their own territory through a consideration of how this character’s sensibility to space might rewrite the programmatic narrative they had produced for their own escape. Between threshold and view (glimpse, glance, gaze, gawk, glare)...territory becomes charged. Producing a compositional overlap of territories where ‘my space’ and ‘your space’ together make ‘our space’, students’ focus on defining connections

that soften boundaries and divisions to allow for gathering and joining – togetherness over aloneness and the expectation of conversation, argument, debate and exchange.

In the arrangement, proximity and overlap of two distinct territories for escape (mine and yours), what are the opportunities for overlap? In *Order, Edge, Aura, the Architecture* practice So-IL (2017) makes an argument for just such contested boundaries declaring them to be not a constraint but a place for exploration and creative action. '...While framelessness was the ideal of an early modernism in an interconnected world, our times are such that we cannot avoid them. Now, careful delamination of boundaries lies at the core of our endeavors in the field' (p. 149). Here, the considered overlap of one territory to another produces opportunities for awareness of the other. An exchange (conversation, argument, debate) is imagined to enliven and activate this new shared space. Students produce a final material assembly as connective threshold (joiner) between their existing escapes to accommodate this exchange. This threshold will serve to structure both the material connection between the two territories and also the immaterial relationship between themselves and another.



*Figure 10 Territories and Assemblies. Wesley Claudy*

Acknowledging the fluidity of self-awareness, Joseph Rykwert (1982) writes, 'Every moment of perception contains a whole personal and collective past, our body is the incarnation of that past; and with every moment of perception this past is reordered and revalued' (p.9-16). A similar reordering and revaluing permeates the collective studio body. While beginning design is a place to create stability for process through an introduction to the dogmas of design language – the beginning design studio might also seek to destabilize through a recontextualization of the very ideas/devices/processes it seeks to delimit. In the Design Foundations studio at Kent State University's CAED, active and sustained engagement – looking closer and looking longer -- is an important tool for propagating the curiosity and attention necessary to shape critical practice.

Immersed in the design culture and community of the studio and reflected through the limits of the exercise, its critique, and assessment, the problem of temporal seeing becomes both conflated and expansive.

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