

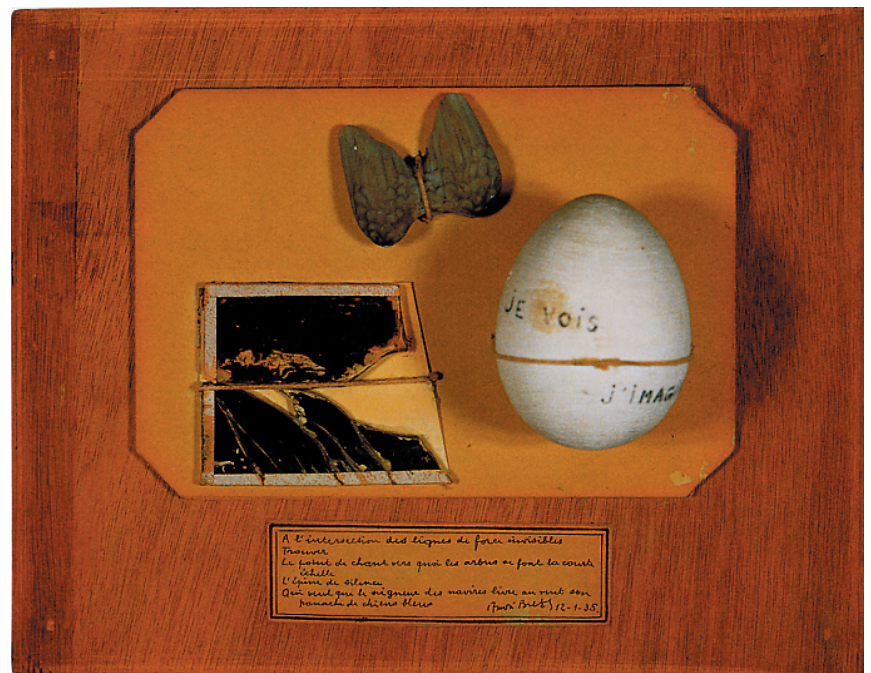
Lesson Seven

Recontextualization

In previous lessons we have discussed how the photograph decontextualizes the scene depicted by slicing the scene from its larger physical and temporal context. In reading photographs we must rely on a combination of knowledge about what the visual signals tell us (a fence post, a barn, a tractor, a cow) and how each of us interprets those visual experiences based on our personal experiences (this is a farm, this is in Iowa, that is a dairy cow, this looks like the 1950's based on the tractor model and the color quality of the photograph etc.)

The frame divides the viewer from the surrounding context of the photograph. The moment in time captured by the camera also isolates that moment from a set of continuous moments. Often the choices the photographer makes (based on personal biases) about viewpoint and frame remain inaccessible to the viewer. We have no clear or definite idea of what personal biases motivated the photographer to choose a certain viewpoint or to frame a certain relationship. We can make assumptions based on what we see, but we truly can't know for sure.

The concept of recontextualization asks the photographer to reintroduce relevant information not seen in the photograph. Recontextualization is not a genre or a movement, per se. The process appears in multiple shapes and forms in many artistic disciplines -- from Breton's collages and Jasper John's paintings to something more accessible like scrapbooking or quilt making. Each object, each scrap, each overdrawing, each piece, each color means something to the maker. Recontextualization collages together a set of materials to inform and create a deeper understanding of an idea, image, feeling, place. In this lessons the photograph acts as the visual anchor for this process.



Andre Breton. Object-Poem. 1935.

Revealing Place: the work of Terri Warpinski

Photographer Terri Warpinski first introduced the notion of recontextualizing photographs to me during my research. While leading countless field workshops into the desert, introducing photography students to the subtle yet powerful nature of the Malheur area in eastern Oregon, Warpinski amassed a set of field notebooks. These notebooks, filled with writings, drawings, and photos, are a catalogue of her collection of information and ideas about the places she visits. These notebooks also serve as a testing ground for her photographic work.

After showing her students some of the notebooks during one of the field schools, a student suggested she take pages from the field notebooks and show them in the gallery. From this suggestion Warpinski created an ongoing body of work titled "Field Studies."

Drawing on her formal training as both a painter and photographer Warpinski infuses her photographs with drawings, text and a collection of wayfinding and place-making devices such as maps, petroglyphs, geologic diagrams, historic accounts, migration patterns, horticultural drawings -- details that reveal unique characteristics of the place. These characteristics illustrate histories and feelings

Terri Warpinski. Field Study:
Upheaval and Depression, Detail
2. 2000.

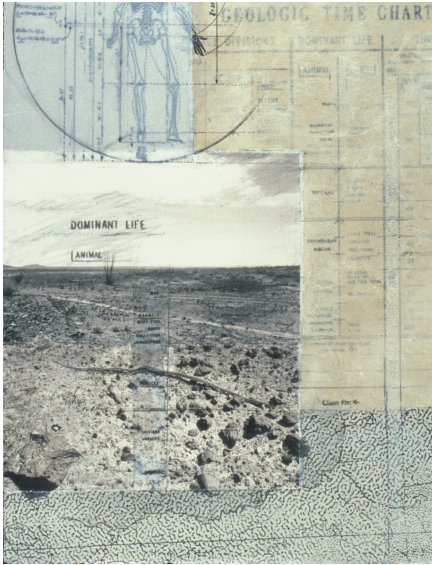




Terri Warpinski. Port of Portland, Panel 3.
2000.

about a place that are often not apparent in a single photograph. Through her work, Warpinski gives the viewer a multilayered experience of the place. She describes it as “turning the photograph around and working behind and through it” (2003). In this manner, both time and physical traces of history become manifest through the layering of image, text and drawing.

One of Warpinski’s bodies of work, commissioned by the Port Authority of Portland, reflects on the present and past life of port localities across Portland. Through the process of layering her own photographs with historical photographs of the same sites, Warpinski reflects past and present uses against one another. In Panel Three a historic photo of men loading lumber at a dock is merged with the



Terri Warpinski. Field Studies: Dominant Life/ Coral Snake. 1996.

The selective gathering and shaping of material is a condition of artistic purpose. This condition, when present, allows a work to be experienced, and therefore lived. It enables a rightness to be revealed materially and allows the inner world of the individual maker to be manifest in the actual world.

Denzil Hurley. "About Making"

dock as it is today. Warpinski extends lines and forms from both photographs, blending further the relationship between the past and present. She relates the history of Portland's ports to their present. A single photograph of the dock taken today would not tell the viewer very much about its past uses. The inclusion of the historic photograph, as well as the map and the note about fir trees harvested for lumber, introduces the viewer to the historic context that created the present day existence of docks throughout Portland.

Through her work Warpinski reveals histories not immediately apparent in a single photograph. She introduces the viewer to grander temporal actions and patterns that occur over long periods of time. She reminds us that there are greater forces at work -- forces that cannot be experienced by a human in a single moment in time. By revealing these phenomena, such as geologic and evolutionary processes, we come away from her work with a deeper understanding of a place in time. Warpinski shows us the multiple layers of phenomena that converge to create what exists today. She successfully infuses context into her photography through this work.

Making: Recontextualization as part of the design process

Revealing unseen contexts to site photographs, through the recontextualization process, helps us consciously acknowledge the multiple factors that influence a landscape. Recontextualization is also a way to more deeply revisit the photograph and the site by reworking the initial photograph.

We engage in the multiple acts of making for this process. Taking photos is one act of making. Recontextualization is a multi layered process of making that extends from the initial act of making a photograph. It brings us closer to deeper meanings and issues not fully realized with the click of the shutter or the glance of the eye. This act of making encourages the designer to look deeply at the images already created and respond to them according to factors not depicted in the photograph.

Most importantly, recontextualization is about articulating the individual experience of a person in a place. That experience may be expressed with a visual representation that is meaningful to many (such as a map or a piece of text) or that is meaningful only to the designer (such as the use of color or abstract form or string of words). It is through the act of making that the designer comes to a better understanding of place, values and design concepts.



Wendy Palamara. 2003.

Student approaches to recontextualization

Students interpreted the assignment for this lesson in multiple ways, which is to be expected of a process that welcomes the articulation of personal experience. Many of the recontextualization pieces combined depictions of site conditions with personal expressive reactions to those conditions. Some students imagined the future possibilities of the site through and beyond the frame, while others layered multiple expressions of the site's context and their reactions to these contexts over the photograph. Some were abstract, while others were very literal. Each served the individual's design process.

In this street sign piece, the student revealed (in a rather subconscious way) how the publicity she received for a downtown redevelopment project effected how she worked. She embedded newspaper text into the image with a tape transfer and then diffused the whole image with tape collage. The text was taken from articles on the redevelopment project. Enough of the text is readable to get an understanding of the issues at hand, but it is also an abstracted expressive articulation of this text. One could assume that the layers of tape articulated the multiple issues that influence a downtown redevelopment project. Though the piece did not directly influence a particular design choice, it did articulate the larger political climate of the project and how that influenced this student's choices as the designer.

Within the process of making, the constituent factors that allow for the realization of a work are not linear in time or nature, but are accumulative. This accumulated experience is very much an individual reality, and it creates a position of knowing, questioning, and reason from which artistic activity can proceed.

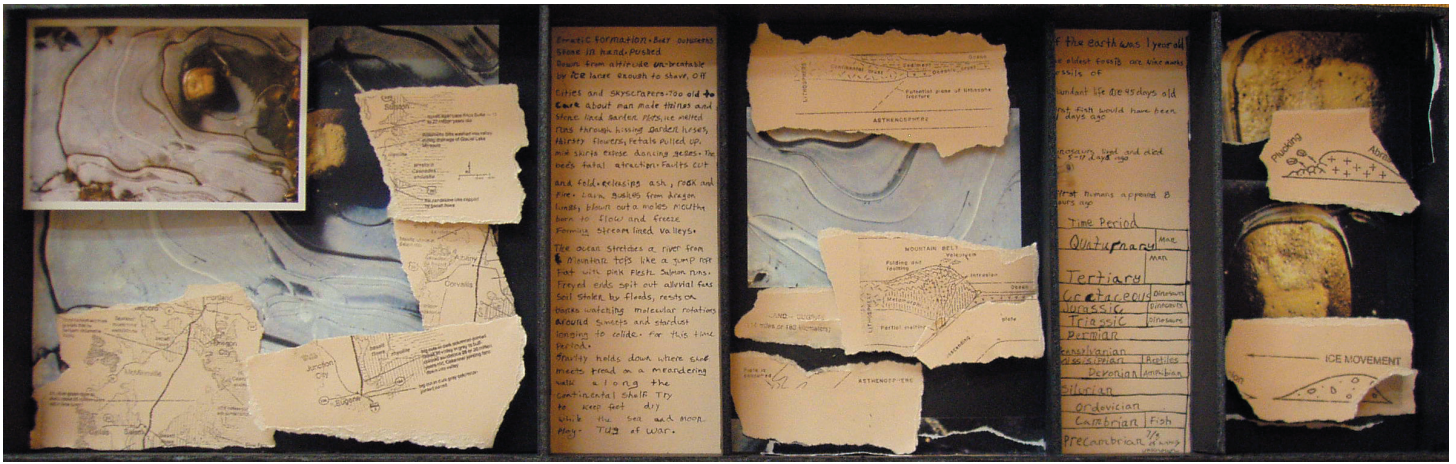
Denzil Hurley. "About Making."



Natira Jones. Urban Farm. 2003.

While some students chose analog methods to recontextualize their photographs, others used digital methods. This student scanned film-based photographs, written text and a seed packet to construct a digital collage. The collage combines familiar, almost symbolic, elements of this site and re-articulates them through various digital manipulations. The recontextualization gains a liveliness representative of the spirit of this place.

Another method for recontextualization is modeling. This student made a set of shadow boxes that she filled with pieces of geologic information and various enlargements of a single photograph. The work explores how geologic time is represented in a single tangible object, the swirling stone. Geologic information scanned from text books is presented on torn pieces of paper, mixed with text written by the student. All of the elements are assembled at multiple reliefs. It is a work to wander through and discover. The physical form of this recontextualization had no formal relationship to the student's design. Instead it explored a single conceptual idea about the experience of time.



Discovery through making

These recontextualizations are a place to explore and discover. They in no way require the student to follow traditional architectural expressions of site condition or produce something that must be readable by a larger audience. This method is a way for design students to break free from the at times restrictive architectural design process and tap into their own valuable experiences and responses to a place. Through this freer form of expression students explore a more personal method of representation that can develop into a wonderful way to present complex ideas and feelings. This method asks students to experiment and gives license to creativity that is not product oriented. Any of these student examples could continue to change and grow through the whole design processes. They don't have to be finished tight pieces; instead they can remain fluid and open ended.

Recontextualization makes you a better photographer.

Recontextualization is an opportunity for reflection on the original photograph as well as its surrounding context. Recontextualization of a photograph alerts us to all of the variant physical characteristics which create and influence that which is depicted in the photograph. It makes us more aware of our personal responses to a place and how that influences how we photographed it. The process of recontextualization keeps the thought process going long after the shutter is released and the photos are flipped through. By engaging more deeply with the photographs through this process, we engage more deeply in the act of photography. Questions arise: Why did I take the photo from that angle? What would this place look like at dawn? How might I show this relationship more

Iris Benson. 2003

Understanding of place is evolved through a combination of individual and collective experiences, through active engagement, memories, and stories. It is difficult to study the learning process of environmental perception, because so much of it is intuitive.

It is important for designers, however, to understand how the phenomenon of selective attention affects widely differing sentiments and priorities. The role of cultural, subcultural, or individual frameworks in our perception and understanding has significant implications for spatial design education. Institutions of higher learning in design tend to unconsciously inculcate a professional culture that simplifies the pedagogical challenges presented by diversity. Unwittingly, the teaching and learning process of the design studio may completely override a variety of culturally or individually based perceptual characteristics that might otherwise enrich and personalize student's design work.

Marie Eithne O'Neill. "Corporeal Experience: A Haptic Way of Knowing." *Journal of Architectural Education*. 2001

clearly? Why did I take this photograph? Could I take a better, more illustrative photograph?

In asking these questions we return to the basic formal qualities of photography: frame, composition, viewpoint, time, atmosphere. Ideally we also reflect on how our feelings about the place influence choices we make about these qualities. This thought process creates a cyclical reflection on both taking and making (taking photographs and making a larger piece). This cycle of reflection helps us become better photographers because it asks us to think more critically about our photographic process. It helps us become better designers because recontextualization asks us to consider multiple unseen factors that influence the physical and visual qualities of a place.

Primary:

Marie Eithne O'Neill. "Corporeal Experience: A Haptic Way of Knowing."

Journal of Architectural Education. 2001.

Denzil Hurley. "About Making." Yale University Press.

Assignment Seven

Recontextualize

Remembering that photographs often become objects in and of themselves, losing their context (become decontextualized), how can we recontextualize our photographs? This is an endeavour that helps our design process by making us think more deeply about phenomena on the site. It also helps clients and outside observers better understand the details, stories, relationships, histories and natural process of the site that are not clearly depicted in a single photograph.

Your assignment is to recontextualize one of your photographs. Look through your past series and choose one photograph. Then through various processes (collage, drawing, painting, photocopying, writing, etc, etc, etc) recontextualize the unseen context. You may use Terri Warpinski's work for inspiration or come up with your own methods and interpretations. Think about what methods are most appropriate for your site and your design concept. The "final product" can be 2d or 3d and any size. The original photograph must be recognizable (to a degree). Think about how this assignment can be used as part of your final review presentation.

Journal Seven

Recontextualize

What major theme, concept, physical function, relationship, issue, history (etc.) were you recontextualizing through this project? (it can be one, many, but please be explicit with your answer)

What methods did you use to articulate the above? (drawing, collage, modeling etc.)

How do those methods reinforce (or not) the context your were re-connecting with the photograph?

Did you discover anything new about your site or your design process while completing this project?

How did it feel to engage in this process of recontextualization?