



**Representation By Design: Mining the Source**  
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**Overview:**

This unit is a hybrid, combining art history, studio instruction, and visual culture and has been interwoven into a freshman foundations drawing course where students are taught observational skills, use of media and process, and introduced to the creative processes of generating ideas and developing personal inquiry.

The inquiry is intended to guide students to question dominant assumptions regarding representation and how artists engage in visual research.

As a requirement, novice art students submit four drawings completed during the sixteen-week semester, which have been completed outside of class time. The drawings are each generated from a given word: Privacy, Data, Boundaries, and Threshold. The drawings are expected to demonstrate learned skills from class activities and studio exercises (such as exploring line, space, shape, value, proportion, as well as conceptual problem solving).

Representation by design is one of the idea-generating explorations currently utilized for the word: Boundaries. Students are challenged to explore, identify and evaluate “the boundaries” of representation in media by mining the source of advertisements.

The unit is taught through a semiotic lens, predicated by the understanding that visual forms, images, and advertisements can be understood as signs, which indicate layers of social, cultural, and political meaning. Through semiotics, students are guided to identify denoted (obvious) visual signs, interpret connoted (suggested or implied) messages in order to generate a deeper understanding.

**Visual Culture: Framing the Data**

Visual culture is a hybrid between anthropology and art history, and involves examining the cultural value of an image over the aesthetic value (Herbert 1996). Where art history explores the artistic intentions, visual culture examines the impact of material culture, considering the context of where, when, why to aid in understanding visual signs.

Students are asked to consider the plethora of visual images and signs which surround daily life, including advertisements, print, television, movies, photographs, and labels on clothing. It is difficult to fully assess, depending on our personal experiences, on average we view somewhere between 3,000 and 20,000 advertisements in a given day. According to Ellen Gammerman, from the Wall Street Journal, in 2013. 1.6 trillion photographs are taken annually, 350 million

images are uploaded to Facebook everyday, and 100 hours of video are posted on YouTube every minute.

**Two Strategies for understanding the saturation of images:**

Strategy One: Examine contemporary commodity culture, through advertisements, identify and deconstruct visual signs.

Strategy Two: Select fine artists, which respond and exemplify investigation into visual culture and representation

**Guiding students to understand the basics of Semiotics**

Semiotics is introduced to students by providing a brief overview that we interpret our world on a daily basis through identifying and understanding signs. Signs are tangible, they are what we see, hear or experience, and can be written, verbal or non-verbal. Semiotics asks us to identifying visual signs within art and culture and inquiring what they may signify, and how they function to create meaning.

Simplified examples of visual signs for discussion include:

- Street signs: we literally obey street signs; such as “no U turn” or “do not enter” or “merge ahead” we see the sign and follow the signified meaning.
- Color: In Western culture we can understand color as a visual sign-blue denotes sadness or melancholy, where red suggests alarm or alert.
- Nature: We can interpret visual signs of the environment, if we look outside and see the ground is wet, we interpret the sign of increment weather, and we may need an umbrella or jacket.

Humans are constantly in the act of seeing, hearing, experiencing, and interpreting visual signs. Signs are dependent upon context in order to create meaning.

Semiotics helps guide students from mere looking towards seeing, engaging inquiry:

- What do I see (what is the sign)?
- What makes “it” mean something?
- What is signified?
- What determines the meaning?
- What is the level of meaning?

**Activity: Identifying Signs through Denoted and Connoted**

Terms are defined:

**Denoted:** What we see, what is indicated, apparent, obvious. What is denoted is the visual sign.

**Connoted:** What is signified, suggested or implied by the visual sign. Connoted messages extend beyond the literal interpretation.

Once defined, students are invited to articulate their understanding by identifying denoted signs and connoted message through class exercises.

**Process:**

Students are shown images of visual art, and first asked to objectively describe the form they see. They are guided to include relevant observations including media, materials, use of elements (line, shape, space, color, value, texture), as well as principles of design, (balance, focal point, contrast, containment, unity, variety, etc).

Students are then asked to articulate their understanding of the subject and content of a given image, and asked to consider how the form supports the content. This discussion leads to interpretation of what is signified from the visual sign, i.e. connoted.

Expanded Discussion: Connoted messages are often subtle, implied, suggested and revealing social and cultural constructs.

**Constructs defined** Lois Fichner-Rathus, in Understanding Art defines constructs as the intellectual, rather than physical product of a culture. Constructs are the shared sense of the way things “should” be, governing the way men and women interact, helping to maintain stereotypes, ideologies and power.

**Introduction: Deconstructing Constructs**

Once students have experienced identifying denoted visual signs, and interpreting connoted messages, they are invited to further dismantle the layers of meaning by deconstructing constructs.

**Representation by Design: Mining the Source Examining Advertisements from the Past.**

Because it is often easier to see prevailing paradigms and constructs from the past, students are invited to examine advertisements from the 1950's, 1960's and 70's where stereotypes are prevalent, pervasive, and “outside” contemporary sensibilities. Students are prompted to identify dominant signs including physical attributes, social roles, gender expectations, race, and authority. Students are asked how visual signs relate to the context of the culture, and challenged to consider what has not been represented.

The exercise begins with looking at advertisements with the following prompts:

- What is the sign?
- What makes “it” mean something?
- What determines meaning?
- How might this connect to the context of where, when it was created?

**Representation by Design: Mining the Source- Examining Contemporary Advertisements**

Students are then shown a selection of contemporary advertisements, and asked to articulate their understanding of the visual signs, describing what is

obvious or denoted, and moving to interpreting what is signified by the sign: connoted, implied or suggested.

- Discussion questions include: What is the advertisement “saying”
- What might the message suggest about society, culture, gender
- Are stereotypes represented? If so, are they accurate?
- Who holds the power in the image?
- What dominant themes present?
- What is connoted regarding body image, body type, race, and authority?
- Are representations positive, negative, or neutral?
- What is being sold, a product, a belief, or culture?

**Expanding Inquiry:**

- Does mass media, stereotypes, cultural/gender expectations shape our understanding of self?
- Do they mirror reality?
- Should we be concerned that stereotypes begin as abstractions and transform into expectations?
- Are representations (signs) neutral?

**Supporting Artists Who Explore the Construction of Identity and Representation:**

Students are then introduced to contemporary artists as exemplars who explore and question the boundaries of representation and the construction of identity as a mobile social construct.

Artists include:

Anna Utopia Gordano  
Vanessa Beecroft  
Cindy Sherman  
Catherine Opie  
Janine Antoni  
Kerry James Marshall  
Barbara Kruger

**Conclusion:** Through this unit, students are prompted to explore and deconstruct representation in contemporary media through a semiotic lens, identifying and interpreting visual signs. The objective is to inspire students to examine the assumptions of culture, as well as embrace their own understanding of identity as a source for creative exploration.

The students are not required to complete their project solely on representation, but many students incorporate the ideas and continue to explore visual signs and identity as a social construction.

Suggested readings and supported documents are included for the instructor, and provided for students to reference.

**Assessment rubrics:**

This unit is introduced in a Foundation Drawing 1 class. All foundations work at the University of Northern Colorado is evaluated on Formal, Technical and Conceptual qualities.

Sample self-evaluation and instructor evaluation:

<p><b>Student Self-Evaluation:</b></p> <p><b>Name</b></p> <p><b>Class:</b></p> <p><b>Project:</b></p> <p><b>Materials:</b></p> <p><b>Dimensions:</b></p> <p><b>Art Elements used in project (circle all that apply)</b> <b>Line Shape Color Space Value Texture</b></p> <p><b>Formal:</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Organization of formal elements and degree in which they communicate idea</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Gestalt-overall unity, impact, and effect</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Expression non-verbal communication</p> <p><b>Technical:</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Appropriate choice of tools and materials</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Skill and command of chosen tools and materials</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Level of craftsmanship</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Integrity of work</p> <p><b>Conceptual:</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Personal Communication of idea/concept</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Comprehension of artistic intent</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Degree of invention/creativity</p> <p><b>Presentation:</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Completion</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Organization</p> <p>Personal Statement and thoughts: Write down your thoughts and observations you may have discovered while creating this piece, as well as what you might do differently or how you may extend your understanding.</p>
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**Instructor Evaluation:**

Criteria Boundaries _____	Advanced	Proficient	Average	Below Average
<b>Formal Investigation:</b> Exploration/experimentation with elements including line, space, value, (positive/negative) and gestalt principals of unity, proportion, balance, and scale.				
<b>Technical/Creating- Execution:</b> Command of tools and materials demonstrating level of craftsmanship and artistic integrity				
<b>Conceptual/ Resolving of Idea:</b> Successful communication of idea. Personalized and expressive evidence of thought. Demonstrates intellectual and creative curiosity. Conceptual and relevant connections				
<b>Presentation:</b> Completed work presented in an organized, clean and conscientious manner				

Comments: