

Extend a photograph.

Some years back I came to a completely different kind of assignment for the people in a workshop. It was about making new work by breaking old molds.

There are reasons to develop your own creative style and tighten up your thinking. And as soon as you get that done, there are great reasons to drop that kind of thing...reasons like staying awake and alive, like expanding, not your output but your capacity.

The participants in this case were photographers, and to stir things up a bit I had asked the painter Alan Magee to join in the teaching. The assignment we cooked up was so simple it was almost confusing: take a photograph and “extend” it. People could cut it up, reassemble it, collage it, paste it to a board and draw the lines of energy out from the image with markers. Or they could sing it or sculpt it, write a story about it. Anything, *anything* they could dream up.

The real point of it was to upend their usual approaches and put aside photography, conventions of seeing, everything that worked for them, and then see what else might happen. We trusted that something would. Like cats held upside down and dropped, they’d land on their feet all disarranged. Which was the point.

What happened went beyond anything I would have dreamed. People began to worry, then to try things. Lots of energy was released, and it coalesced around building a great puppet, about 11 feet tall, with a large head, and a profusion of limbs.

But the real result was not this glorious puppet it was the sense of possibility that participants left with at the end of the week.

That’s what I left with too. And I began to give that assignment in some form or other from then on. One student wrote to me years later, saying, “I took some of your assignments as jokes, until I saw the beautiful work that others produced.”

Something like design or photography or music can be a wonderful way to organize our perception of the world. But after a while it can become an impediment. We just look for things that can be designed or photographed or sung, and we start to ignore things that can’t be poured into our usual forms. But it is the influence of those chaotic

shards that make our work rich. If we jump to our solutions, our work gets progressively narrower. Chords become mere notes.

But at any point we can interrupt this degeneration by deliberately opening up again. And that's what this assignment was meant to do..

Rather than talk about what it all means, I'll let the assignments tell you. In the end they make a convincing argument for shaking yourself up and they'll point out the path to doing so.

1. *On a string*

The class was asked to take hold of a piece of rope about 25 feet long. Then we were asked to close our eyes, and we were led out of our classroom, down a hall, out a door, across a parking lot and through the gate of a small walled garden. Then we were told to open our eyes.

What we saw was a carpet of thick green grass that grew to the base of an adobe wall. A few feet in front of the wall were two old-fashioned lawn chairs, the kind with metal seats and backs welded to a springy tube base. The metal was painted a kind of worn turquoise color. The sun was broken into streams of light by tree branches and flowed down the wall in streams of light.. Above there was a very clear blue sky with ice cream clouds. A light wind made the branches dance and the light shivered on the wall.

We stood for perhaps 30 or 40 seconds. Then we were told to close our eyes, and we were led back to our classroom.

2. *A violent event*

The class was told to wait outside while the room was prepared. When we were told to enter, we found the room had been darkened. On the floor lay a flashlight. Its beam shone across a small plastic bag that contained some gravel and a newspaper clipping. It looked like an evidence bag. Next to it there was a small tape recorder that was playing the sound of running footsteps. The clipping told the story of a young woman who had been jogging on a road on the desert edge of town and been attacked.

We all read the story, then waited, listening to the sound.

Abruptly, it stopped.

3. *Flour makes the image*

We were invited into a very dark room, walls covered with black cloth so that the light from the projector that sat on a table was completely absorbed, no reflections, no image visible.

Next to the projector sat a dish of flour. It took a while for someone to make the connection, but finally someone picked up a pinch of flour and tossed it into the projector's beam.

And suddenly there it was, a circle of light floating in the air. Others started tossing handfuls of flour into the air, and as they did the image grew and pulsed, shimmering in the falling flour. Everyone emerged from the room with a fine coating of white. (The maker subsequently included this in an exhibition.)

4. *Pictures on the body*

A woman stood in the middle of the room. She was fully clothed, but there were a series of prints taped all over her body, including her face. The photographs were of parts of a body clothed only in underwear. People approached her and began to look at the photos. Then someone started to lift the nearly naked photos to look at the clothed body underneath. This reversed what one might expect, but it felt quite intimate, almost transgressive.

5. *Burned-down house*

This piece took place in a tiny room that had been used for film loading. People entered through black curtains to find a shelf on which were set out several small framed photos of a suburban house, both exterior and interior, along with some old faded family photos. They were illuminated by about eight candles, and there were sticks of incense burning. Because the room was tiny, the smoke from the incense was choking and the heat from the candles had built up to a point of discomfort.

This person's mother's house had burned down a few months before, and all of her possessions had been destroyed. These photos were some of the few things that had been saved.

6. *Polaroid Meta-Room*

On the morning a class was to review the results of this assignment, one student came in and started taking pictures of details of the room with a Polaroid camera. He photographed light switches, push pins, electrical wires, nothing with any intrinsic interest. As each picture came out of the camera he taped it up near whatever it was he had photographed and moved on without waiting to see it develop. (I confess I watched him and thought, "Last minute desperate attempt. That'll never work." But I said nothing.)

People started to gather in the room, and someone noticed one of the Polaroids and went over to have a look. Then someone else. Then we all started looking around the room. And I realized that the pictures were not the point, that the act had taken us past familiarity of the room and provoked us to look again. And, sure enough, the room was different, because we saw it.

7. *Rock and Roll and Colored Energy Drink Piece*

This was a performance piece that defies description. We were invited to the artist's house, where a small stage had been set up outside in the yard. The curtains were shower curtains and were drawn shut. Then the piece began: the curtains were flung open to show a small stage, a boom box, a wading pool, several gallon jugs of some kind of "colored drink product", and two large bottles of diet coke rigged with some kind of apparatus. The performer came out wearing a bathing suit and goggles, started the music—raucous, high-energy—and picked up one gallon after another of the "drink" and started gulping it down, spilling most of it down his body. The finale came when he activated the Coke bottle apparatuses, dropping Menthos candies into the liquid and causing a reaction that set two fountains of Diet Coke foam spewing into the air. Ta-da!

8. *Forest of Lost Souls*

The artist had done a series of photographs at various music clubs in Seattle. The subjects, isolated against a white background, had taken extreme poses. For his extended piece he had printed the images out, found a small grove of trees, and pinned them to the trunks here and there. There was a kind of ethereal music playing. Visitors were invited to wander through the forest and look at the pictures, which in this context were more like people than pictures. To further connect the visitors to the souls, they were given small white candies that they could leave to nourish the lost.

9. *The Story*

We were invited into a dim room, where a storyteller sat in a rocking chair surrounded by candles. Without being instructed to do so, people sat around her, either on the floor or chairs, and she commenced to tell a story about her family. We all felt like children in the house of a Good Witch. The story was riveting, but I don't remember a word of it.

10. *Flight of the Orange Coat.*

This person took photographs from a previous project and transformed them in an unusual way. The project had involved this person wearing a signal-orange plastic rain jacket in various outdoor settings, and the idea had been to explore feelings of alarm and safety in the world.

For this project she printed the images and set them out in a room and invited all to see. There it was, the project.

Then we were directed to a door. When we looked out we could see the orange plastic rain jacket, filled with helium balloons and rising into the sky beyond some trees. We held our breaths as it seemed headed to an entanglement with some branches, then relaxed as the jacket soared away into the sky and out over the bay, finally disappearing. I wondered where it might come down, what thoughts it might raise in whoever found it.

11. *Nose clip project*

The photographer had noticed that there was a viewing distance at which a photograph ceased being an object and began to be an environment, filling the eye and

going into the awareness in a different way. He made a large print, and everyone was invited to view it, first from a more objective distance, then from closer up. The closer distance was determined by taking a string that had been attached to the center of the photo at one end with a clip at the other. If you attached the clip to your nose you were at the perfect distance, and the image transformed from object to environment.

12. *Say What You See*

This is not an extension of a photograph *per se*, but it is probably an ancestor to this assignment. People were asked to just sit in a room for a full half hour and describe everything they saw and felt. They had to speak everything aloud, not just recite inwardly, and to stay with the concrete. And if they had a strong response to what they were doing, either negative or positive (“this is driving me crazy!”), they had to verbalize that too. Then they had to notice their own state, their awareness, and make photographs...of anything at all.

13. *Orange Waiting in a Maple Tree*

This piece took place in a large field. In the distance was a long line of tall trees, and in the middle of the field was a stick with a small ring on it at about eye height. As one approached the ring, one tended to look past it to see what was the focus of this piece. Nothing was apparent. Then one looked through the ring, and there in the distance, perhaps a few hundred feet off was a single orange balanced in a forked branch. It had been in plain sight all along, and even with one’s eye at the ring one could see the entire setting. but the shift in seeing came when someone said, “See...”

14. *Saint Francis*

The artist read a short piece on Saint Francis of Assisi, some things about his life, about the way he moved from his rich world into a poor one. As the artist spoke, another member of the class walked into the room wearing a tunic made of rough burlap. The woman told of how Francis was being upbraided by his father in center of town, and took off his rich clothes and gave them to poor bystanders, leaving himself naked. At that point the man shucked off his burlap robe.

15. *Buddha in the Mirror*

This one was fairly complex and demanded investment from participants, but it had a wonderful ending. We walked across the campus, keeping silence as we had been asked. We came to a large stone Buddha and were asked to sit in a circle around it, look at it for a minute, and then close our eyes. I had learned by now to wait things out. Time passed. Finally, I had a sense of some presence in front of me. I opened my eyes, expecting to see again the Buddha statue, and instead I saw...myself, in a mirror held by the artist. I smiled.

She continued moving around the circle and holding the mirror in front of each person and patiently allowing them to become aware. And as each person opened their eyes, they smiled, just as I had.

16. *Write down what happened when Marguerite Johnson opened the closet with nothing on her mind?*

People wrote down all kinds of things, the funniest of which was that she found the entire 1958 World Series and had to spend the week cooking hot dogs and sweeping out the stands at Yankee Stadium.

I haven't commented on the projects here, and it is probably best to leave them to work on readers as they did on participants.

But there are a few general things worth pointing out. One is that most of them functioned by simply rearranging what was around, things that were very simple and available. By using these materials and circumstances and guiding the ways that people could interacted, they provoked a shift in the observers *perception*. In the simplest of them, there was often just a pointing out that left the response to the viewer. They didn't argue a point or a conclusion.

Another thing was that participants more or less had to enter the experience. They were actors at least as much as they were observers.

Another point is that, although the makers had never really done anything like this before, they got it at once and did very effective work. The possibilities already existed in them.

So if we're successful and busy as designers or whatever we are, why would we do this kind of thing? A lot of people would say, *no reason*. And if you feel that way there *is* no reason. At least not now. Maybe later.

Others might say that such game-like behavior is not serious enough. And it is play. But play is serious. Watch playing children and see them learning before your eyes.

And especially for those of us who work in communications but never face who we're communicating with, it is just great to see the response when our work lands on people.

But the real point of doing this kind of exercise is not to do our job but to stretch beyond ourselves. What we get out of it is not so much new work but new capacity. Think of it as a stent for clogged creative arteries. Or as making our minds more muscular. Anything that gets us past the curse of habituated perception is worth trying.

Here are a few models of building and learning. You can take bricks and stack them neatly, into, say, a wall. Or you can lay them side by side and make a nice path.

Or you can take the bricks and throw them as far off as you can, then go look at how they land, and make something out of that.