Panoramic Drawing with New Media

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Media, or the extensions of man, are “make happen” agents, but not “make aware” agents. The hybridizing or compounding of the agents offers an especially favorable opportunity to notice their structural components and properties.¹

Introduction

Foundation drawing places an emphasis on perception and the various ways of representing what is visible. Most importantly, drawing teaches students how to see, not just in the visual sense, but how to look beyond one’s assumptions of the world in order to clearly perceive what surrounds us— a skill indispensable to all creative and intellectual investigation. But what does being clear-sighted mean in an age when technology has become an extension of our physical senses?

Today’s college students come to classrooms equipped with smartphones, laptops and tablets—technologies that have made a significant impact in the way we teach and the way students learn. Art and design educators may view this media appendage as a distraction or an enhancement to learning, depending on how it is incorporated into the curriculum. With the onset of smartphone technology, the nature of perception is radically changing for the next generation of artists and designers. Cell-phone cameras are carried everywhere, recording the world around us with videos and photographs. This paper explores the notion of panoramic practice—an expanded application of traditional siting methods that integrate digital pocket technologies.

Siting with Pocket Technology

The viewfinder and siting stick are traditional tools used by artists to render proportion, shape relationships, and perspective in representational drawing. Originally developed by renaissance artists, they are still widely used in the classroom to teach descriptive geometry. As cellphone cameras have made their way into the classroom, however, students have developed a tendency to replace these traditional tools with digital snapshots. The initial skepticism an educator may feel towards this trend should give way to inquiry as one considers not only the ways that this pocket technology modifies our perception, but also how these gadgets can be used to investigate the complex nature of perspectival multiplicity.

Modern cell phone cameras have spurred a proliferation of photography and instant imaging. Many smartphones now come equipped with panoramic software, which use stitching technologies to capture landscapes with 360-degree views. This paper presents two new assignments that have been developed to exploit this common media, the first called Panoramic Practice and the second, Surrounding Practice. Both assignments follow instructional units on composition and perspective, which use the classic siting stick and viewfinder device to define the picture plane.

Panoramic Practice

The word panorama comes from pan, meaning all, and horama, which means view; it represents the “unbroken view of a whole region surrounding an observer.”² Panoramic images
are usually associated with the depiction of scenic landscape, but they have also been historically used to depict narrative events such as military battles or religious stories. The term was first used in the late 17th century by landscape painter Robert Barker, who placed a patent on his 360-degree paintings of Edinburgh and London. According to the literary scholar and cultural historian Stephan Oettermann, the panoramas of this time represented a “visual appropriation of nature” that was used both for entertainment and as an “apparatus for teaching people how to see the landscape.”

Along with this didactic purpose, these early technologies provided immersive and virtual entertainment much like television, film or video today. They represented an optimistic overview of the world, one that corresponded to enlightenment views of the time, which championed science and the human domination of nature. While their popularity waned in the early 20th century as cinema and photography became more accessible, the recent dissemination of stitching technologies on cell phone cameras has prompted a 21st century revival of the panoramic format.

Assignment #1: Panoramic Practice

For the first exercise, students were asked to select a site (interior or exterior) that contained a foreground, mid-ground and background. They were then instructed to photograph the site from one position with at least eight sequential pictures. After printing and assembling them together, they were to use this as a study-reference for a drawing.

In the introductory presentation, students were shown examples of artists whose work employ panoramic formats with photography such as Dawn Clements, Rackstraw Downs and David Hockney. These artists demonstrate the complex and entwined historic relationship between photography and drawing/painting. Hockney, who has studied and written about this kinship, insists that “photography came out of painting and that’s where its going back.” As we survey this evolutionary affair, it’s important to identify what has traditionally distinguished these two media: photography, as a mechanical extraction of an image, and drawing (or painting), as a kinesthetic addition to an image. Each time a person attempts to hand render an image from a photograph, it is further absorbed, embodied and translated into a uniquely subjective interpretation.

With this understanding, students were encouraged to apply their own mark-making techniques and drawing preferences—like line, texture, shading, contours—in order to integrate these images into their own hand. The emphasis of this project is on a horizontal format, which is sequential and linear. It draws attention to width, reading across the plane like a narrative. It is continuous and portrays place from a single standpoint that spans the horizon. (Figs. 1 and 2)

Fig. 1. Work example from Panoramic Practice assignment. Student: N. Wetherell. (11x60”) 2013
Assessment

Students were evaluated on their craft, creativity, originality, effort, execution and willingness to take risks or solve problems in new and inventive ways. Outcomes, which were typically mixed in quality, always included distortions in the perspectives because, as students experience first hand, the perspective in this format is multiple and shifting. Weaker projects either lacked commitment to this realization, or they were inadequately developed in general. The best projects allow the viewer to travel across space as if it were a short but fluent journey, one that incorporates a rhythmic repetition with lyric fluidity. The hand-drawn translations tended to unify, solidify, and warp the picture in such a way to give the piece character subjectivity and personality.

Surrounding Practice

“The issue in our posthistorical, postliterate culture is to avoid the pitfalls of further reductive, nonparticipatory representation, a threat constantly present in the electronic media and all forms of simulation. Artists and architects interested in the cultural consequences of cyberspace, however, emphasize the potential for computers to transcend their binary logic and become a tool for a poetic disclosure: they stress ‘random access’ as opposed to ‘linear’ memory.”
Unlike the first assignment, which emphasizes horizontality and sequential access, the second is based on a fragmented assimilation of space with more ‘random’ or ‘direct access.’ The notion of random access assumes no fixed linear progression but rather an immediate access to various locations and positions.\(^8\)

To illustrate these concepts, students were presented with examples of early 20th century cubist collage in which multiple perspectives were combined to give viewers a sense of movement and time. Cubist art requires “instant sensory awareness of the whole,” according to McLuhan, “the moment that the sequence yields to the simultaneous, one is in the world of the structure and of configuration” which permeates the electronic age.\(^9\)

Among the contemporary artists we looked at was Gordon Matta-Clark, (fig 3) whose deconstructed architectural installations represent his desire to convert buildings “into state of mind.”\(^10\)

The charcoal drawings of Charlotte Schultz are another great example of shifting interior and exterior scenes. Her work, shown in figure 4, uses light, shading and contrast to depict the transitions between remembered literary spaces. In both cases these artists make use of fragmentation in their compositions. They assimilate different viewpoints in order to create a more embodied representation of space. The way these artists work is also didactic- they teach the viewer how to see in a new and subjective way.

Assignment #2: Surrounding Practice

For this project students were asked to take and print out five to ten black and white digital photographs of an interior space that transitions into at least one other space- either interior or exterior. They were then directed to cut out the pictures, so that they were irregular in shape, and arrange them on a sheet of 18x22” paper in such a way that they may communicate movement and/or transition from one space into another. Once the pieces were glued down, students could draw on the collage to, in essence, stitch them together by hand. This preliminary study was then used to make a larger more integrated drawing on 22x30” paper.

The second assignment was significantly more challenging for students than the first one because it forced them to assimilate disparate imagery. Although students were encouraged to make thumbnail sketches (to work out composition and focal points), many still had difficulty stitching the images together. This challenge, however, was not without its rewards.
The first stage of the process, which often involved multiple revisions, forced students to imagine what it might look like to see through walls, ceilings and floors. They had to conjure up ways to create both overviews and underviews as well as insides and outsides.

A key factor in this problem was in the joining or fusion- how to effectively merge one image (or place) to another without a visual reference. Some students chose circular compositions, which give the illusion of continuity where there is none. In figure 5, the student connects the stairway rail and balcony rail (from separate rooms) to create a circular uniformity. She combines flat surfaces along with deep perspectives and joints them with patterns of tile and brick. The viewer looks outside through the center of the composition and moves around that view with stairs into a deep hallway.

The student in figure 6 arranged her piece as if it were a graphic elevation. The order and position of the rooms begins to resemble a dolls house or graphic novel. Fortunately, she kept the wonky diagonal lines that frame the different rooms, which provides a dynamic and lively composition. The sharp delineations made for abrupt transitions, but the format still managed to communicate an elaborate architectural experience.

The freshman student in figure 7 had significant difficulty integrating her images. The pictures she chose were a combination of details and wide-angle shots of rooms. Her first study was almost like a map or board game, attaching the images with an arbitrary pipe she adopted from the wood stove. As we discussed strategies for directing visual movement, she began to see shape relationships between the framed pictures and the steps. She decided to try using these rectangular shapes, rather than the pipe, to move the eye around the picture frame, like stepping-stones. She extended the spiral stairwell upward and then broke it apart to connect it to the picture frames. Then she reassembled it and
spun it back down, leading the viewer across to the banister and stove pipe. While there is some confusion in this piece, the overall effect is playful, rhythmic and musical, with stairs that begin to suggest a double fan or piano keys.

Another student, who was older and had more experience, managed to integrate her disparate views by magnifying the hallway so that it sweeps across the lower half of the picture frame. Although the snapshots were not taken from one vantage point they look as if they were because of the way she has joined them with the patterned wood floorboards. (fig 8) Here we have an all-encompassing view, which, like the panorama, gives us the sense of being encircled. The broad swerving floors and arched ceilings provide fluidity and unity to the composition. This student spent long hours detailing the linear grain on the floorboards, resulting in an impressive density of line work.

Assessment

Once again, the degree of successful compositions varied widely, but virtually all students came away from this assignment with an expanded awareness of structural arrangement and the diversity of available solutions. Divergent thinking and unique problem solving strategies were assessed along with craft, effort and a student’s willingness to revise her ideas along the way.

Our class critiques included discussion about perspectives, distortion and unification. We examined the relationship between the mechanical image and the handmade. Students observed how the photograph seemed to anchor the drawing, giving it certainty, solidity and referential weight, while the hand-drawn elements tended towards the idiosyncratic, quirky and gestural, giving the picture a more human presence.
More advanced students learn from these exercises how to work freely between the hand-drawn image and digital programs. (fig 9) The complex and surprising amalgams that evolve from this interchange are infinite and generative.

**Conclusion**

The hybridization of two media creates “a moment of truth and revelation from which a new form is born.” This, according to McLuhan, has the ability to release us “from the ordinary trance and numbness imposed by them on our senses.” A recent example of this would be the cell-phone/camera hybrid or the scanner/printer hybrid. But for any media to become a “make aware” agent and not just a “make happen” agent, as McLuhan states, one must subvert the technology in such a way that it becomes more human; that is, it must be subject to the unique, the fallible, and the responsive characteristics of human temperament. The hybridization of digital media with paper drawing spurs yet another dialectic between the material and the virtual, the hand and the machine, the pixel and the pen. The awareness, however, only comes as a direct result of perception in conjunction with creative production. The integration of media together with personal sensibility allows for the greatest expressive potential.

The panorama is useful in this way because it joins the instantaneous image to the endless narrative; it flows across horizons and slips into fragments. As a pictorial device, it incorporates multiple viewpoints into a broad spectrum, providing a suitable template to survey the time...
we live in. As a linear format, however, it can also be restrictive. The notion of random access, as opposed to linear access, liberates both the maker and the viewer by presenting numerous arrangements and interpretations that defy order, and it is from this disorder that new order can evolve.

Daniel Libeskind’s Collage Rebus II (fig 10) is an excellent example of a random access drawing. The interlocking floors, pillars, stairwells and walls have little or no logic. It exists as a speculative and poetic space, rather than an actual one. And perhaps because of that, it is able to communicate an even greater sense of interiority and transit within an architectural construct.

The two assignments outlined in this paper teach students more than just how to be mindful of their environment. They teach them to notice positional relationships- the way we move around in space as it seemingly moves around us. They attempt to capture the multiple and the temporal in one place, with the hope that we may behold and create another place.

Fig. 10. Daniel Libeskind, Collage Rebus II (1970)

Notes:

1 Marshal McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (Cambridge, MIT PRess1994), 49.


5 Ibid, 47.

6 David Hockney, “In Conversation: David Hockney with William Corwin.” The Brooklyn Rail, February 1, 2012.


11 McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions on Man, 55.