

learning to see

Visual Seminar – Manual

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Danielewicz: we are sociologists, social researchers involved in such problems as the issues of visuality, social functioning of new communication technologies and media. We played a double role in the Visual Seminar: that of workshop moderators and that of observers of the process taking place over several days. This experience led to observations and conclusions, which are presented below. We hope that this will serve as a complement to the knowledge of what happened during the Seminar, and as recommendations to help organize similar processes.

PHOTOGRAPHS: Tomasz Kaczor

BIBLIOTEKA WIZUALNA



1. purpose and challenge?

The fundamental challenge of the Seminar was to look at the concept of visual education, that is to examine its critical and creative potential and to see how it works in different areas of formal and informal education (in relation to various fields of visual culture – such as: photography, film and other visual arts, cartoons, performance, network, or public space). The work at the Seminar was also accompanied by reflection on whether or not create a separate concept, distinct from (currently much better developed) media education. The demand to talk about visual education is based on the belief in the essential practice of seeing and producing new images, which is broader than in media education – the role of what we see as well as how, what, why and what for we look.

SHOWING SEEING: OR, THE QUESTION OF VISUALITY

The objective set out for the participants of the Seminar was to rethink and deconstruct the two key terms: “visual culture” and “visuality”. The very notion of “visuality” is too broad to be used in further work – it soon became apparent that it contains almost everything: almost every manifestation of culture

and everyday life, the structure of which is largely determined by the sense of sight. Whereas the use of the term “visual culture” allows you to build a common group of references.

The notion of “visual culture” and the concomitant “visual turn” [*Compare the issue of “Kultura popularna” dedicated to visual culture (no. 1/2009)*], gave the foundation for a separate discipline of visual studies in the mid 90s. Operating at the crossroad of cultural studies, art history, anthropology and sociology, visual studies have developed an institutionalized reflection on the socio-cultural manifestations and consequences of visibility. “Visual culture”, which is the key in this reflection, can be reduced to visual practice (seeing, staring, glancing, showing or looking at pictures, photo, videos showing reality and mediating in it) and the techniques (and technologies) of image processing that we use not only in art, but also in any images present in everyday life (e.g. printed books, copybooks with writing in it, painted pictures, printed reproductions – in colour or black-and-white, screens of computer or TV monitors, printed or embossed signs, scanned books in electronic readers, or unprinted books).

TEACHING TO SEE: OR, THE QUESTION OF EDUCATION

Another question that often came up during the Seminar was the question about education in general and visual education in particular. What does it mean to educate, anyway? Does the distinction between formal and informal education make sense? Is there a place for the concept of “accidental education” in the institutional order of education? Is it possible to distinguish “educational situation” from the whole of life, where we verify our findings, learn new things, perceive, notice, observe and analyze the world around us on an on-going basis?



2. definition of the situation

SEMINAR

A seminar is a special form of activity, derived from academic tradition. The purpose of a seminar meeting is to exchange knowledge and pose questions together, not necessarily to provide definite answers. A seminar is therefore a luxury in times when almost every action is to bring “tangible”, and thus measurable, results. It is a time reserved for free wandering, seemingly pointless exchange of ideas, allowing to verify the trails emerging in the conversations, including those leading to “dead ends”. On the other hand, a seminar firmly embeds the meeting in the context of an academy – it suggests the use of a language closer to the theory, facilitates the use of abstract thinking, introduction of generalizations and the search for models.

PRACTICE-THEORY-PRACTICE

The participants were mainly practitioners – educators, animators, creators – using visual tools and situations in their work (e.g. film, photography,

art, cartoons, but also – meetings, performance, public space). The Seminar gave them an opportunity to confront the different categories and perspectives problematizing what they deal with in their daily practice. This enabled them to use tools other than in their daily work, to refer to (also critical) theory, to search for certain principles and patterns, but also – to pose questions about the meaning of actions in the broader socio-cultural context. On the other hand, many times it contributed to blurring of the relation with practical, everyday activities. The exercise of navigating between two perspectives: the daily life-practical and the theoretical-abstract, was performed repeatedly during the Visual Seminar. Interestingly, it was often easier for the practitioners to theorize than to come out in their discussions from ordinary, everyday practices. It seems that the daily experience was underestimated by the participants, who were more likely to reach for the big quantifiers and generalizations. And so, one could hear more often: “people prefer ...”, “people are so and so ...” rather than, for instance: “Mrs. X comes for a movie every Tuesday and says this and that”.

A big advantage of the Seminar was its comprehensive programme, in which there was room for both theoretical considerations as well as reaching for one’s own experience and drawing conclusions from it. The work was made more dynamic due to the combination of various working models (lectures, workshops, discussions and presentations), and the meetings with our successive guests. The “jumping” from practice to theory and back, inherent in the programme, probably made what happened at the end possible, that is the joint work on a publication (in the form a website), the content of which is to balance between theory and practice. The combination of these two areas, often called for in many circles, really took place.

3. who?

PARTICIPANTS

As previously mentioned, the participants of the Seminar were practitioners – people dealing with visual education, though not necessarily defining their activity as such; involved in many ways in the creation, processing, sharing, transmitting or showing, which they use as a tool to achieve a variety of objectives; working in various institutions (public and third-sector, local and national). A group of nearly twenty people gathered in one space.

GUESTS – NEW VISUAL PERSPECTIVES

Guests visited the Seminar every day: creators, animators and theoreticians (visual culture anthropologists, new media researchers). They would enter into the ongoing process with a new, fresh perspective, present their point of view and stimulate new discussions. They conducted lectures, workshops and talks. As a result, the topics recurring among the participants had a chance to develop – comments from other perspectives than before, extracting a new aspect of the case.



4. how and where?

TIME AND SPACE

The space where we spent this intense time was not without significance. A barn out of town – ancient but reconstructed in a modern way. Separating us from the surrounding nature with a translucent wall, letting in only vague outlines of the outside world. More or less accidentally, the wall became a symbol of visual practices, for which we were trying to give a theoretical framework.

Our work was also structured by openness and multi-functionality of that space – the fact that there were no internal divisions (such as a dining room, a workshop room, a place to relax) brought the participants into the state of readiness – being together in constant visual contact. We spent four days there, during which a lot had happened. Time discipline, always with someone in charge of it, helped implement the program and avoid stopping at a specific time (such temptation was constantly present, and the emerging threads and topics were fascinating). Interesting threads acted as an inspiration – left for later, introducing unrest.



5. what happened and how?

THE PROGRAMME

The four days of the Seminar were conceived as a process of creative deconstruction of certain concepts and reconstructing them anew. As a result of the meeting, the participants were to be prepared for work on a publication – however, neither the shape nor the form of it (e.g. text) were to be determined by the organizers. Thus, it was a process designed to lead to an indeterminate, creative effect, dependent on the participants' intention. It is a difficult organizational task – to design a process that would be stimulating and that would determine the framework, while it would remain open to changes and the participants' needs. The Seminar required on-going designing of the process and flexible reactions, rather than precise planning of the process or rigid adherence to delineated guidelines.

The key value of the workshops seems to consist in opening and problematizing different issues (primarily visual education itself), rather than

providing ready guidelines or closed answers. The entirety, seen from a perspective, falls into successive moments of “immersion” in theorizing, abstract thinking, synthesizing and “emerging” to the surface. The goal of our three-person team was to support that process of “emerging”, thus allowing the participants to work with their own experience and knowledge, which are often so close to us that they become indiscernible.

Already the beginning of the Seminar we equipped all the participants with the tools to collect knowledge, so that none of the current observations and reflections was forgotten. These were simple forms in a makeshift notebook, allowing them to keep record of the questions and justifications, explaining why answering them seemed important or necessary. However, the use of the forms turned out to be a difficult method of extracting knowledge – the tool required capturing of spontaneous thoughts, saving them and simultaneous planning of the value of potential answers. This meant constant posing of the question: “Why am I asking? Why this might be important?”.

DAY 1

The Seminar began with the workshop of Showing seeing, inspired by the text of W.J.T. Mitchell [*W.J.T. Mitchell, Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture, translated into Polish by M. Bryl, „Artium Quaestiones” 2006, no. XVII, pp. 273-294.*] followed by a discussion. The tutors – Magda Szcześniak and Łukasz Zaremba, visual culture anthropologists – proposed a number of tasks that were to make the participants rethink the obvious dimensions of visual practices. What does it mean to look? What is a glance? What is a medium? These are the fundamental questions in the work of visual educators. The participants' task in the first exercise was not so much to “show seeing” (as it takes place in the exercise described by Mitchell) as to describe in words what one could see. And one could see a set of ambiguous images – deluding, deceptive, misleading, vague, open to many

interpretations, the variety and equality of which blurred, rather than clarified the concept of visual media, deconstructed the concept of image and – most importantly – revealed the conventionality of visuality and some unconscious habits associated with seeing.

Despite the common, often overlapping interests of the participants and their general visual expertise, an attempt to define the basic concepts (such as: “seeing”, “a glance” and “a medium”) proved to be extremely problematic and needed. It was a common experience of the complexity and ambiguity of the terms which in everyday use, in professional practice, are regarded as clear and obvious. Firstly, this applied to the difference between what is noticed and what is looked at – where we direct our look in a conscious and intentional manner and what we see automatically and instinctively. Secondly, this also applied to language difficulties associated with naming these practices. During the workshop, there was a reflection on the persons excluded from the visual universe – the visually impaired and the blind. Contact with them reveals visuality of our everyday language, which after all is full of such phrases as: look; you see; see you; I want to show you; look at it this way; you can see that... etc. This reflection – on the one hand – leads to questioning of the obviousness of visuality, and on the other – it shows how deeply rooted visuality is in our perception of the world.

DAY 2

The programme for the second day was a continuation of reflection on the concepts of “education” and “visual education”. The morning series of mini-lecturers was to broaden the issues of visuality. This part of the course included: a presentation of and discussion on fragments of the movie *Helvetica* (<http://www.helveticafilm.com>), getting acquainted with the main conclusions from the study on the participation in the culture of “Youth and Media” (“Młodzi i Media” <http://www.mim.swps.pl>) and

“Community Techno-Workers” (“Technospółeczniczy”: http://creativecommons.pl/wpcontent/uploads/2012/05/Technospolecznicy_raport.pdf).

An important part of the day was a workshop with the guests involved in various fields of visual art. We worked in three groups led by Piotr Stasik, Karol Radziszewski and Joanna Kinowska. The workshop was based on the idea of deconstruction – it was aimed at taking selected examples of artistic or educational projects and activities to pieces. The idea consisted in working on a selected “good practice”, posing critical questions and considering whether, and according to what criteria, the practice was successful or not, and what was omitted, though it would have an opportunity to develop. With examples of activities broken down to different levels (of environment, identity, mission, etc.), we were able to identify their critical and problematic points as well as the opportunities. For the exercise was not aimed at the denial of the reasonableness of these actions, but rather at carrying out their “vivisection”, which would reveal what was seemingly obvious, yet would allow one to formulate a set of questions, which are worth asking also oneself before starting to act according to a specified method.

Next on the agenda was a lecture by Iwona Kurz, dedicated to different ways of thinking about visuality and the reasons why one should work for visual education.

An important activity during the second day of the Seminar was also a workshop which identified the individual professional experience of the participants. Recognition of personal experience and critical use of it is a big challenge. Sometime it is easier to theorize, generalize, raise to the level of abstract thinking. We wanted to extract seemingly obvious facts and related knowledge, which is why we asked the participants to become researchers of their own environment as part of the exercise. Everyone got one of six forms with questions on the selected topics (1. Barriers to visual education; 2. Changes

seen over time; 3. Recipients; 4. Plans for the future; 5. Successful activities in the field of visual education; 6. Partners in the activities). The participants worked in pairs and questioned one another, following the survey instructions. After 15 minutes they changed roles, so that everyone had a chance to be both a researcher (an interviewer), and a subject (a respondent). After a round of questions, those dealing with the issue were to develop results. At the end, we presented them to the group. This allowed each participant – despite the fact that they worked on a narrow issue – to learn the conclusions from each thematic field. This gave rise to many debates and opened up new lines of thinking – especially those relating to the ambiguous role of the educator and the trainee (who is who in the process of visual education) and the status of the activity recipients (which was accompanied by the question: what exactly do the recipients expect from us?).

The agenda for the second day closed with a lecture by Ruben Diaz Lopez, dedicated to the philosophy of remix-based art and presenting its examples.

DAY 3

The aim of the third day of the Seminar was to create, act and construct – making things anew.

The morning lecture, given by Ruben Diaz Lopez, dealt with so called Expanded Education and was a new attempt to question the traditional division in education, into educators and trainees, which is sometimes also a tool of domination. Three parallel workshops (conducted by Agata Jafościńska, Tomasz Szerszeń and Janusz Byszewski) were intended to devise and implement conceptual activities with the use of a selected tool (Internet, photography, a table). They were an attempt to transcend the apparent obviousness of how to use them and a specific practice of “thinking of acting”, as well as an attempt of a practical use of the categories recurring in the discussions so far.

The next lecture on the agenda – given by Edwin

Bendyk – was dedicated to visions of the future, and in particular the future created by the current educational system, and to ideas for the creation of a better future based on today’s education.

Then, there was a workshop on mapping of the shared knowledge and experiences gained by the participants who worked in subgroups on specific topics. We attempted to create extra space for discussion, based on the topics and areas that had already appeared in talks and lectures. The work was a kind of a “knowledge and experience extractor”.

We worked on six issues, which formed the initial synthesis of the major themes emerging during the Seminar: 1) visual education recipients; 2) purposes of visual education activities; 3) responsibility; 4) areas of operation; 5) the role of visual educators; and 6) threats of visual education processes. Each thematic area consisted of a set of questions for the participants to work on in smaller groups. We created three stations in the room, where each of us moderated a discussion on one of the topics. Whereas the participants were divided into groups of several people. Each group stayed at a given thematic station for 15 minutes. Their task was to propose a way to address the issue, with the assumption that another group would come after them and continue working on the topic. We had six issues prepared, so the work was carried out in two rounds.

The described workshop was also an experiment based on cooperative work and a challenge for the habits we acquire at school. Educational institutions teach us to work in a linear way, most often individually, which is why it is more difficult then to work in groups (teams) and follow a process. The aim of the workshop was to divide the process into short sections: one group started work on the subject, wrote down their observations and left it for the next group who took over the responsibility for the subject for the next 15 minutes. The work was cemented and finished by the third group. This sequence of actions aroused much opposition and misunderstanding,

but we think it was a good practice. The situation of working in a group and the fragmentation of the process develop communication skills, the ability to take responsibility for small sections of work, the ability to delegate representatives, and thus to plan work; they stimulate cooperation with other process participants.

The subsequent two rounds of questions were an intense experience. The most difficult area of work turned out to be the issue of the action participants – specifying the groups of recipients and reflecting on their expectations was a great challenge. Educators’ activities are usually guided by the vision of “action for all” – which is to say – “for those interested or willing”. The advantage of this approach is certainly the lack of barriers that could exclude someone from the process only because they belong to a group other than the presumed audience. The disadvantage, however, is that the perspective is too broad. “All” is too broad a category to be able to plan effective communication channels and a method to cooperate with them. A discussion on the audience also revealed that educators rarely reflect on the needs and expectations of the audience, the participants in the activities.

DAY 4

The fourth day of the Seminar was devoted to a summary, synthesis and a return to one’s own work; it began with collecting questions that had accumulated in the course of the Seminar and which

the participants noted down on the forms prepared for this purpose. Some of the questions were similar, some concerned the same issues but seen from different perspectives. Grouping similar questions allowed to catalogue them in different categories. The questions collected from the participants formed a kind of a mental map, indicating the important issues and the issues for further consideration.

Then there was a round, during which the participants presented their initial ideas for the development of a material for their joint publication: we talked both about the content (the subject) and the form (an interview, a text, a collage, a podcast). This was an amazing example of cooperative writing – joint reworking and rearranging of the terms and concepts. The habit of writing as an individual and isolated work often makes it difficult to think that we could allow others to join and assist us in the process of writing, to bring new inspirations. The Seminar, the structure of which provided for both intellectual activities and real action, for mutual contact, inspiration from the world of art, science, theory and criticism, resulted in such creative cooperation.



6. *foot notes: or, a few comments on the side*

VISUAL STANDARDS

Discussions about visual standards are extremely difficult because according to the principles of good manners, taste is not to be discussed. However, the discussion is present and necessary in the scientific community and the circle of creators of visual culture. At the Seminar, an apparent conflict arose during a discussion on whether visual education should uphold “good standards” (both in film and photography, but also – in space design, architecture, interiors), or on the contrary – break them and act more like dynamite, indicate their conventionality, or even hegemony.

The standards need further clarification and verifying where they appear in everyday life – looking at how they are realized on a daily basis, how they are entangled in projects. Perhaps an open conversation on “the eye of the beholder” would help instil “aesthetic pluralism” and clearly emphasize the non-standard character of visual education. In a way, the workshop module on “good practices”, conducted by Joanna Kinowska, Karol Radziszewski and Piotr Stasik, touched on the “breaking of the spell” cast on hidden assumptions and invisible elements of visual projects – such as their political and social

context. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to carry out a similar deconstruction of projects implemented by the participants, to place more emphasis on the observation of one’s actions in a critical manner.

EXCEEDING THE BOOKSPRINT*

Booksprint is a marathon on team writing – or rather – creating of a book. It is a formula which assumes that people already have the knowledge on a particular subject, they know what they want to write about and, by working together, they focus on extracting this knowledge and closing it in a book. The formula of the Visual Seminar allowed for much more.

First of all, we have fulfilled, to some extent, the dream of a meeting between theorists and practitioners, where practice is not regarded as training ground or food for theorists, and theorists do not play the role of experts with knowledge inaccessible to so-called “ordinary people”.

Secondly, the four days of discussions, workshops and lectures not only unearthed the knowledge the participants already possessed, but allowed to activate and express new ideas.

Thirdly, the possibility of four days of listening and free talks, without a clear distinction between “coaches” and “trainees”, created a democratic situation – a group where the opinions were equal and strongly expressed. Without a doubt, at the intersection of different experiences and perspectives, a completely new knowledge emerged, new ideas and new associations reflected in the publication summing up the Seminar, but also in some implemented actions.

* See the article of Grzegorz D. Stunża **Booksprint – bieg po książkę**, summarizing the work on the publication *Medialabu Warszawa*. <http://edukatormedialny.pl/2011/12/25/booksprint-bieg-po-ksiazke/>

QUESTIONS INSTEAD OF ANSWERS: or, a mini-manifesto

» The mode of school education accustoms us to immediate formulation of answers to the questions asked. The reflex and accuracy of response is important in some areas, but we believe in the power of posing questions as such; we believe that it is a difficult art.

» Questions should make us think independently (not necessarily to find answers).

» Questions should help us break free from an automatic and common-sense way of thinking, shake us out of the rut of habits and intellectual routine, help us leave behind the well-known reality and head for new perspectives.

» Questions are never stupid.

» Questions are not to have one assumed or correct answer – sometimes their strength lies solely in the awakening of imagination.

THE BASIC QUESTION WORTH ASKING ONESELF IS THE QUESTION ABOUT THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF AN ACTIVITY:

- *why am I doing it?*
- *what is this that I'm doing?*
- *has someone already done similar things?*
- *why do I think that this tool will let me achieve this goal?*

THIS RELATES TO THE QUESTIONS ABOUT ONE'S OWN ROLE IN THE ACTIVITY:

- *why am I doing it?*
- *what is this that I'm doing?*
- *has someone already done similar things?*
- *why do I think that this tool will let me achieve this goal?*

FINALLY, IT IS IMPORTANT TO ASK ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES OF ACTIONS:

- *what is the purpose of the action?*
- *what do I want to achieve with this action?*
- *what will the world look like once the action is completed?*
- *what will I feel like after completing this action?*
- *what will the audience/participants feel/think/do after the project?*
- *how will I know whether the action was successful?*
- *what role did the tool I had chosen play in this action?*



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capturing the views of young European media-makers

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