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Approach & Practice of Visual Communication
in the Transition Year

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Education

in

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DIPLOMA FOR ART AND DESIGN TEACHERS

by

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List of Illustrations

Introduction

This dissertation is an account of devising a suitable module in Visual Communication for Transition Year students. The Transition Year distinguishes itself as an examination-free year that also allows for alternative subject matter. Visual Communication has always been taken for granted in traditional education, and the Transition Year programme provides a welcome opportunity for educators to create modules based on their own disciplines and background.

In chapter one, I will look into the background of the Transition Year programme, and in particular the role of the Art Department. I am interested as to what recommendations or guidelines the Department of Education stipulates regarding the content of a module in Art.

Chapter two is a literary review on the subject of Visual Communication in the context of education. I am interested on any commentary regarding the consequences of raising the profile of Visual Communication in education.

In chapter three, I will be concerned with the learning environment that I believe should be created if Visual Communication is to be taught effectively in the classroom.

Chapter four is an account of practising Visual Communication in Transition Year.

CHAPTER ONE

Transition Year: The Background

The 1990s have heralded the introduction of major change in the Senior cycle of post-primary education. Among the changes introduced at Senior cycle in the 1990s was the launching of a Transition Year option for all students. The Transition Year concept had been introduced in 1974 but then it was confined to a limited number of schools. However, in 1994 the Transition Year option became an integral part of a new three year Senior cycle.

The old traditional Leaving Certificate was not meeting the demands of the ever increasing number of pupils who were continuing into the Senior cycle. Two alternative Leaving Certificates were gradually introduced, the V.P.T.P. and the L.C.A. The Transition Year Option, immediately after Junior Certificate, became an integral part of all three Senior cycle programmes.

Transition Year is the year when a student may take a break from the pressures of an examination course and allow the intellectual, social and emotional development to take their course free from the strains of examination. The Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland publication 'The Transition Year' states that 'the whole Transition Year programme is aimed at the personal development of students. It is a year in which students are encouraged to acquire a better knowledge of themselves and of the society in which they live, a year in which they are freed from the constraints imposed by a tightly structured examination programme'[1].

Each school works out it's own Transition Year programme. It will take into account the local community. It will allow the student to study non-examination subjects. It will give the student the opportunity to develop social and moral behaviour. It will allow the student the chance to take work experience or work simulation, without the pressures of study.

During the Transition Year programme, students should experience a wide range of subject matter that are 'intended to facilitate the integrated development of the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, physical, social and vocational capacities of each individual student'[2]. In the guidelines issued by the Department of Education, it is recommended that not more than

40% of the Transition Year curriculum should be devoted to Leaving Certificate subjects. As the guidelines do not prescribe any specific course, it is up to each individual school to decide on the content of the curriculum. 'Programmes offered, therefore, vary from school to school and reflect the educational ethos of the schools and their traditions, the needs of the students and the nature of the teaching and administrative support available'[3].

The Transition Year option allows students who enter post-primary education early, an opportunity of a time break, before they begin their Leaving Certificate programmes. It is an integral part of the new three year Senior cycle. It is still optional but when it's value to society is fully measured there is no doubt that it will become compulsory for all students.

The role of the Art Department in Transition Year

In the publication 'Transition Year Programmes: Guidelines 1994-'95', art as a subject falls into the category of 'Aesthetics Education'. It states the 'aim is to develop an awareness and appreciation of visual art ...'[4]. In the 'Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools (1987-88 - 1992/93). 'Visual Education', 'Media Education' and 'Communication Skills' are amongst the elements that should be included in the Transition Year programme. In the ASTI guidelines, the Transition Year curriculum should be based on the following study areas:

> Communication Studies; Functional Mathematics; Environmental Studies; Practical Subjects; Aesthetics; Physical Education; Education for Living; and Religion [5].

As these are not traditional exam-orientated subjects, co-operation between teachers from different disciplines is required. The Department of Education's guidelines, under the heading of 'Interdisciplinary work', states that an interdisciplinary approach would '.... help to create that unified perspective which is lacking in the traditional compartmentalised teaching of individual subjects'[6]. The guidelines offer suggestions of how interdisciplinary work could be achieved. It suggests that by

choosing a social theme such as pop culture or unemployment, this could provide a '.... focus for study during the Transition Year'[7]. Regarding the role of the art department, the Department of Education has no specific guidelines or instructions. However, in the 'Transition Year Programme: Resource material' it suggests under the heading of 'Art, Craft and Design':

- To develop an awareness and appreciation of art, craft and design.

- To facilitate the students' development and self-expression by interacting with the Arts.

- To develop non-verbal languages.

- To provide a basis for improving standards at Leaving Certificate Level.

- To develop career options.

- To develop future hobby choices[8].

Also, in the ASTI guidelines, under the heading 'Communication Studies in the Transition Year', it states that media studies seeks to increase students understanding and enjoyment of the media in its various forms: 'television, film, video, radio, photographs, popular music, printed materials, books, comics, magazines and the press, and computer software'[9]. Possible activities listed under this heading include:

- Visual Codes: Image analysis of graphics, photographs and other visual texts

- Signals and Signs: Structured signals, symbols and logos

- Newspapers: Physical production - work of journalists, editors and sub-editors; editing

- Television: Analysis of t.v. serials; news coverage; "soaps".

- Advertising: Messages in advertising, images of women and men in advertising

- Teenage Magazines: Popular male and female youth magazines

- Film: Codes and convention in film genres[10].

The aim of Communication Studies in Transition Year is stated here as ' .... to develop critical awareness and judgement among students of the way the media work in society and of their impact on our values and attitudes'[11]. It also aims to teach students how to 'produce simple media "products"[12].

As there is no specific course prescribed in the guidelines, the Transition Year curriculum will vary from one school to another. Depending on the resources of each individual school, the role of the Art Department within the Transition Year will also vary from one school to another.

Footnotes (Chapter One)

1   ASTI, Transition Year (Dublin: ASTI, 1993), p. 31.

2   Ibid., p.2.

3   Ibid.

4   Transition Year Programmes: Guidelines 1994-'95 (Dublin: Department of Education, 1993), p. 21.

5   ASTI, The Transition Year, p. 3.

6   Department of Education, Transition Year Programmes, p. 6.

7   Ibid., p. 7

8   Department of Education, Transition Year Programmes: Resource Material (Dublin: Department of Education, 1993), p. 4.

9   ASTI, The Transition Year, p. 29.

10   Ibid.

11   Ibid.

12   Ibid.

Abstract

Title: **Approach and Practice of Visual Communication in the Transition Year.**

As a subject of learning, Visual Communication has always been taken for granted in traditional education. At present,The only opportunity open to post primary students to experience alternative education, or areas outside of the examination driven curriculum, is in the Transition Year.

This dissertation is an account of how Visual Communication can be incorporated in a Transition Year programme as a beneficial subject. However, important factors such as dealing with mixed ability classes, the erratic nature of the Transition Year timetable, and the resources available, all must be taken into consideration when designing a suitable, workable module in Visual Communication.

Garrett Glynn, Dip ADT. April, 1997.

CHAPTER TWO

Visual Communication: A Literary Review

The processes by which children learn to read and write have been well documented. The processes of how we learn to make and decipher visual messages are just as complex and much less well studied. Commentators like John Morgan and Peter Welton believe that the bulk of visual education takes place outside the classroom. 'Visual education today is too often an erratic and spasmodic affair of which the greater part takes place outside the classroom. The art class is an embattled tower of self-expression in a school which has been occupied by armies of facts'[1].

It is a common view amongst many educators that visual education has been unjustly neglected in traditional education. Education has been primarily concerned with literacy and numeracy with little attention given over to developing or improving the level of 'visual literacy'. David Sless points to an imbalance of learning within traditional education, he believes that 'visual literacy and fluency are skills, discernible and distinguishable from literacy and numeracy which form the backbone of our educational system, but are no subjected to anything like the intensity of teaching that students are given in language and mathematics'[2].

So what are the consequences of this imbalance? Commentators such as Ralph E. Wileman believing that the imbalance in education, specifically the neglect of visual education, will limit the way we chose to articulate our knowledge and our thoughts. He states that 'more often than not, we feel more comfortable as verbal rather than visual communicators. The reason for this may be that we are trained in the use of verbalisation from our earliest days. Our constant exposure to the spoken and written word as a means to share information - and its long dominance among educational techniques - has led us to assume that verbalisation is the most effective means by which to communicate[3].

Society has placed a high value on the word, both written and verbal, but society is changing as a result of advances in technology. These changes have helped emphasise the importance of other means of communication. Morgan and Welton express a common view that unless we develop an understanding of the processes of visual communication, we may become

vulnerable to those who control the new channels created by technological advances. They write, that we need 'greater awareness of the means by which we understand what we see, not simply because any study of humanity is fascinating, but because without it we shall be unable to take advantage of the technical, commercial and social possibilities of the latter years of the twentieth century. Others may take control of the channels and seek to manipulate us; only by understanding the techniques at their disposal will we be placed to defend our own interests'[4].

If the visual media can be used to misinform, distort and manipulate, surely there is a need for visual education. Children watch advertisements on television, read comics and magazines, discuss each other's clothes, play computer games, observe road signs, browse through record sleeves, collect badges. Morgan and Welton believe that each of these activities 'has effects on the images they produce'[5]. In education, they see the need for 'replacing the traditional expressive function of art education with one in which the 'language' of the visual world is taught'[6]. Children are being constantly bombarded with visual imagery from many quarters. This wealth of visual information, according to Morgan and Welton, is 'shaping their lives, influencing their attitudes, tuning their responses'[7]. They believe that education should provide children with a basic language to express their thoughts on visual communication. 'A well developed critical capacity applicable to the visual world should be the normal equipment of every school leaver, in the same way as an English teacher aims to form adults who are critics as well as receivers of the spoken and written word. This approach need not stifle the expressive needs of children but would better equip them positively to realise their purposes'[8].

Peter Green also agrees that the goal of visual education should be to provide children with the necessary language and knowledge of the workings of the visual world. He states that, although we have little input in the design and manufacturing stages of commodities, elements such as fashion and advertising influence what we buy. 'As consumers of the mass designers' and planners' products we need to be articulate and active in our response. So many design solutions have visual form so that what

is now required is a visually literate community capable of understanding the reasons for the visual forms that surround us'[9].

What would be the consequences of raising the level of visual literacy in education? Paul Messarsis suggests four positive consequences most commonly imputed to the enhancement of visual literacy. In the first place he believes that by raising the level of visual literacy, the comprehension of visual media can be attained. He writes that the 'images in visual media (single pictures as well as movies and television) often differ considerably from the appearance of the real world. Because of these differences (e.g. the lack of colour in outline drawings or the sudden shifts in point of view caused by movie editing), some writers have argued that the ability to interpret visual media requires prior experience. In this kind of argument, the term "visual literacy" would refer to the familiarity with visual conventions that a person acquires through cumulative exposure to visual media'[10].

Secondly, he proposes that experience with visual media is not just a means to better visual comprehension but also may lead to a general enhancement of cognitive abilities. He states that 'the cognitive skills that are brought into play in the interpretation of television and other visual media may be applicable to other intellectual tasks as well'[11].

Thirdly, Messarsis suggests that visual education might make a viewer more resistant to the manipulations attempted by television commercials, magazine advertising, political campaigns, and so on. He proposes that 'even if learning about the visual devices used in picture-based media does not have any effect on a viewer's comprehension of pictures or on one's other cognitive abilities, it might still make the viewer more aware of how meaning is created visually - and therefore less likely to be taken in by abuses of this process'[12].

Finally, he believes that by raising the level of visual literacy this may generate a greater aesthetic appreciation. He states that an 'awareness of the ways in which visual media give rise to meaning and elicit viewers' responses can also be seen as providing a basis for informed aesthetic appreciation. Knowing how visual effects are achieved may lessen the vicarious thrills we might otherwise derive from visual media, but such knowledge is self-evidently a prerequisite for the evaluation of artistic skill'[13].

If these are some of the positive consequences of raising the level of visual literacy in education, then surely there must be a case for giving visual communication a higher profile in the curriculum of general education. As stated earlier, children's pictorial education takes place outside of the classroom in the world of popular culture. It is a common assumption in education that children's skills in interpreting visual imagery have been acquired elsewhere, or that no skills are necessary at all. David Sless writes that 'most people do not think very deeply about pictures. There is very little that they encounter which might provoke thought and even less opportunity to nourish and sustain such thoughts as do arise. Simply, pictures are not normally the sort of objects on which we care to exercise our intelligence'[14].

Whilst admitting that this is a generalisation, Sless offers us a 'sketch' as an 'indication of the kind of factors that can contribute towards basic expectations of students to pictorial material'[15]. Drawing from his own experiences from early childhood, Sless examines the role visual material plays in children's books. As the child grows, the emphasis changes between the relationship between words and pictures. 'The changes probably begin with the beginning of schooling. The child coming home from school with a picture in one hand and a piece of writing in the other, soon discovers that parents are not only more interested in the writing but have a much wider range of critical comments to make about it'[16]. Sless goes on to make the point that at every stage in the child's development, his/her literary skills are carefully monitored, establishing the 'importance of written material and the relative unimportance of pictorial material'[17].

We have seen that the neglect of visual literacy is a direct result of the over emphasis placed on verbal and numeral literacy in our education system. Visual education has it's own place in the education system but deserves a higher profile, if we desire a visually literate society. The positive consequences of raising the level of visual literacy in education makes a strong case for raising the profile of visual education. If visual education is to be included in the curriculum of traditional education, as a legitimate and worthwhile subject area, traditional attitudes of both parents, and society as a whole, must change.

Footnotes (Chapter Two)

1   John Morgan and Peter Welton, See What I Mean: An Introduction to Visual Communication (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), p. 3.

2   David Sless, Learing and Visual Communication (London: Croom Helm, 1981), p. 21.

3   Ralph E. Wileman, Exercises in Visual Thinking (New York: Visual Communication, 1980), p. 15.

4   John Morgan and Peter Welton, See What I Mean, p. 3.

5   Ibid, p. 4.

6   Ibid.

7   Ibid.

8   Ibid.

9   Peter Green, Design Education: Problem Solving and Visual Experience (London: BT Batsford, 1974), p. 8.

10   Paul Messaris, Visual Literacy: Image, Mind and Reality (California: Sage, 1994), p. 3.

11   Ibid.

12   Ibid.

13   Ibid.

14   David Sless, Learning and Visual Communication, p. 73.

15   Ibid.

16   Ibid., p. 74.

17   Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

The Learning Environment

If visual communication is to be taught effectively in the classroom, a suitable environment must be created. Ideally it should mimic the same characteristics of a real working studio, but of course this would depend on the budget of the art room. In order to create the right working conditions, the art room should be perceived, as closely as possible, as a professional design studio. Walls should never be bare. Ciaran Benson wrote that the 'basis for visual sophistication must be laid in the everyday environment of the young'[1], he goes on to say that schools are 'frequently offenders in matters of interior decoration'[2]. I believe that it is important to have examples of students' work on view throughout the school, and not just confined to the art room.

Students should be encouraged to respect materials and the art room in general. This can be achieved by giving the students a degree of responsibility regarding the everyday designation of responsibility which should be carried out on a rota basis, and should not be used as a means of punishment which is too often the case. Ideally, the students should see the art room as 'their own'.

The students should feel comfortable in voicing their opinions, and I would see the role of the educator expand to that of a listener. Students should be encouraged to critically engage with their subject matter, and it is important that they should feel comfortable in voicing a view that will be listened to. This should help in fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect. The educator should never lose sight of the fact that it is he/she who is in control, and should have the final say in important decision-making. As the same time, the educator should be open-minded and should consider carefully any constructive advice offered by any student. It is important that the students should be kept well informed at all times, particularly regarding their own progress, and the direction and overall aim of the task/module.

As with any subject, it is vitally important that the educator be perceived as one who is enthusiastic and highly knowledgeable in his/her field. The

educator should move freely around the room and not be seen to be 'stuck behind the desk'. In areas of the module where students have to consult one another, they should be allowed permission to move freely themselves. I believe that if the educator is seen to be motivated and enthusiastic regarding the project, this will help in motivating the students. The educator should be perceived to be well-informed and interested in the visual arts. He/she should display a clear knowledge and should be comfortable with the 'language' of visual communication. This area can be particularly motivating for students especially if the subjects or the contents of the module are closely related to their own interests or culture.

I see the need for educators who are familiar with the students' lifestyle and culture outside the classroom. Peter Green wrote that we 'desperately need teachers with a broad view of culture. Creativity in schools is so often found only in the art room. The child's world, however, is rich in popular and living culture, so often in conflict with the rigid ideas of adult art. We need to remove tension areas between strict attitudes of what constitutes culture and the existing culture of urban life. Often the teacher is frustrated by the child's rejection of adult cultural values - though the rejection may indicate the narrowness of his own view of culture'[3]. If the students can see that the educator is familiar with their interests and culture, it can help in developing a solid rapport, and also increasing the range of communication between student and educator.

Visual communication is a creative discipline. The educator must be confident in his/her own ability if success in the learning environment is to be achieved. Hugh Mearns wrote that 'no superior outcome is possible in this field without the creative teacher. She it is whose subtle directing keeps the whole activity going. She shows her admiration for high achievement but honestly and without flattery. She will be patient with the slow worker but she will not give her approval to work that is shoddy. Quite often she will withhold assistance to a child in difficulty who, she senses, is persisting rewardingly in the right direction. She is sure that being sensitive he will come through successfully. Her mature use of language, her taste, her confidence in the worth of her work, her genuine interest, all the elements, indeed, that make her an influencing personality - these are at work on the children all the time, although they may never be aware of it'[4].

Footnotes (Chapter Three)

1   Ciarán Benson, The Place of the Arts in Irish Education: Report of
        the Arts Council's Working Party on the Arts in Education (Dublin:
        The Arts Council, 1979), p. 132.

2   Ibid.

3   Peter Green, Design Education, p. 11.

4   Hugh Mearns, Creative Power: The Education of Youth in the
        Creative Arts (London: Dover, 1958), p. 251.

CHAPTER FOUR

Transition Year 1996/'97

A class of twenty five Transition Year students were timetabled with me for a treble class, once a week. Art is one of the twelve core subjects on the Transition Year programme 1996/'97. There are seventy places available for students wishing to join the programme. Each student is interviewed for suitability and, depending on acceptance to the programme, each must sign a 'contract of learning'. This is signed both by the parent and the Transition Year programme Co-ordinator, on behalf of the staff involved. This is only the third year since the Transition Year programme was first introduced in the school.

Coming from a design background, I wanted to create a suitable module that would develop in the students an understanding of the conventions and processes of visual communication. Understanding that not all of the students would have had previous experience in art, I placed an emphasis on the importance of personal and intuitive concepts rather than concentrating on developing specific technical skills. It was suggested early on that a project incorporating the design and production of the set for the school musical would be appropriate, as it was being staged by Transition Year students. In previous years, this was normally undertaken by Fifth Year students studying Art.

The First Sequence

The school play/musical is an important event on the school calendar. As it is viewed as an important public relations exercise, a large proportion of the budget for Transition Year goes towards the production of the play/musical. Regarding all aspects of the production, including the set design, the Co-ordinator of the musical had the final say. This year's production was the musical 'Grease'.

This was an ambitious project which required a great deal of research and practical work. Due to the variety and complexity of the project, I believed that group work would be appropriate. I divided the class into three groups; with each group responsible for the design of one of the
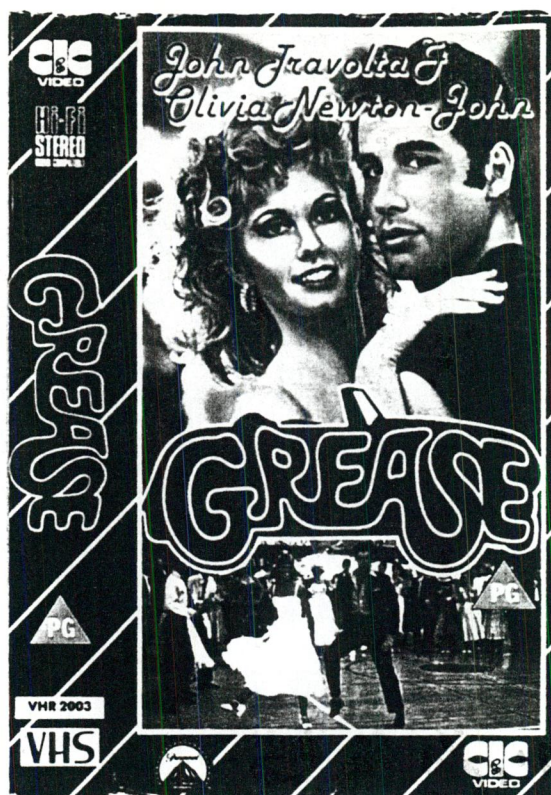
Figure 1 :
Students were shown films that related to the theme of the musical i.e., 1950's American teenage culture. The films provided a rich source of imagery and inspiration, for ideas for the set designs.

Figure 2 :
Students were asked to collect relevant imagery and present them as a 'styleboard'. The purpose is to capture the style of the era, in looking at such details as appropriate colours imagery and typography.

key backdrops. As only one third of the class had previous art experience, I ensured that they were not concentrated in one single group. It was important that everyone, including myself, was clear on what had to be achieved. This meant that communication with the Co-ordinator of the musical was vital.

Believing that it would be beneficial to students, they were shown some films relating to the theme of the musical, i.e. teenage culture in 1950's America. After viewing 'Grease: The Movie' and 'American Graffiti' (see figure 1), a discussion followed regarding different aspects of the films. This was a good opportunity to generate motivation and enthusiasm for the project. Students discussed the different lifestyle that teenagers experienced in the 1950's, and how it related to the culture of today's teenagers. The films also provided a great source of imagery and inspiration for the students' designs. Students were given full access to the school library, and were asked to collect relevant imagery relating to the theme. These images were then assembled as a collage to create a visual 'styleboard' (see figure 2). As this early stage, I placed a high degree of emphasis on the importance of 'meeting deadlines'.

Students were encouraged to engage in 'brain-storming' sessions within each group, allowing them to pool their thoughts together as to how to approach their task. All proposals were to be presented to the class by each group in turn. Students were encouraged to voice their own opinions on each group's design concepts. It was important that each student was aware of what everyone else was doing, so communication between all groups was essential.

Early on in the project a number of problems became evident. Some of the students who had done art before were unhappy working in groups, as they felt that the bulk of the design work was being left up to them alone. The level of research was poor in all groups, and I found myself doing a lot of work for them. Due to a tight budget, there was a severe shortage of basic materials. This had an effect on the standard of rendering and presentation of designs. However, the single biggest problem was the unavailability of students. Rehearsals for the musical, field trips and seminars had a severe effect on the continuity of classes. Random
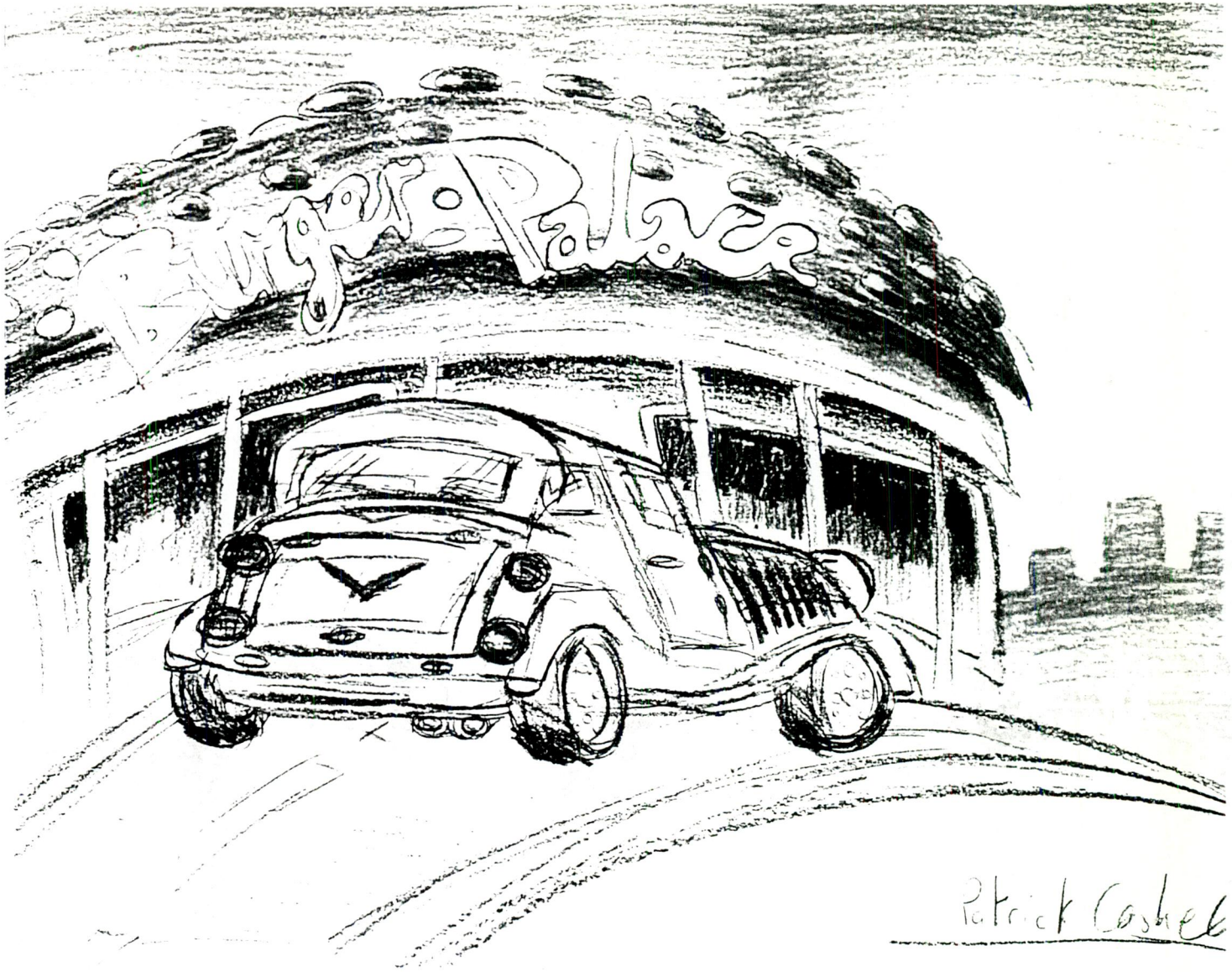
Figure 3 :
Students work. Sample of students' designs for one of the key backdrops for the musical 'Grease'.
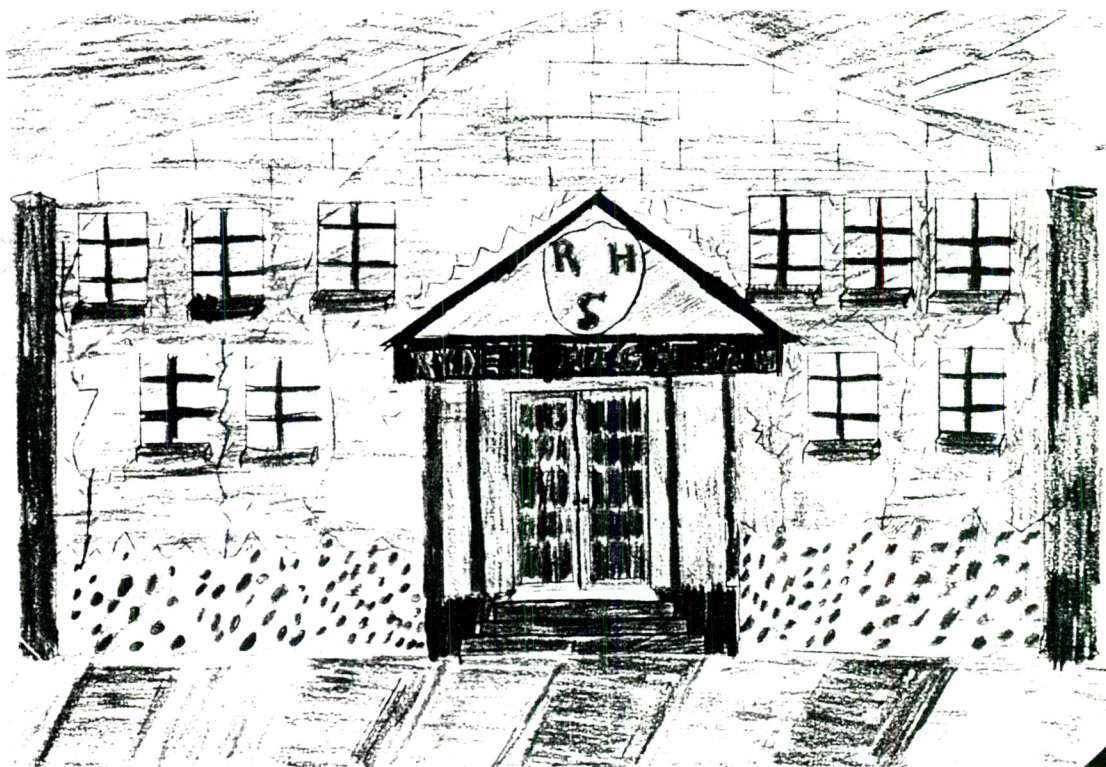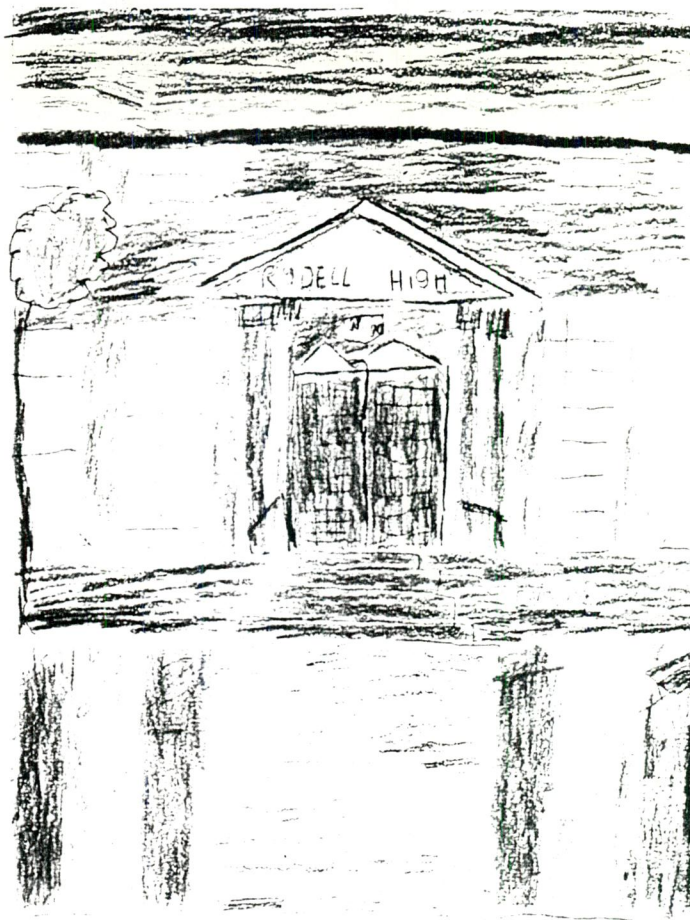
Figure 3.2 :
Students work in progress.

Figure 3.3 :
Students work. Sample of students' designs
for one of the key backdrops for the
musical 'Grease'.

absenteeism was also a problem. Due to the hectic nature of the Transition Year programme, communication with the musical Co-ordinator was difficult. Instructions were verbal and secondhand.

On the positive side, the level of design that was produced was surprisingly high. There is evidence in their designs of the influence the films had (see figure 3). The majority displayed an understanding of appropriate imagery for a given theme. The first sequence, although not entirely successful proved to be a valuable learning experience, and certainly influenced my approach to the second sequence. It would have to be less ambitious in it's entirety, and more suitable for a mixed ability class.

The Second Sequence

It was not until late January that a second group of twenty five Transition Year students had their first class with me. I designed a module with specific aims that would enable the students to:

(a)   develop a knowledge and understanding of the principles of design;
(b)   develop the necessary visual communications skills to record and communicate accurately;
(c)   develop an appreciation of letter forms and typography; and
(d)   acquire an understanding of the process of design.

The brief was an exercise in graphic design where students were asked to design and produce a CD cover for a music group. Fundamental to the techniques of layout is the relationship between text and image, and only through an exploration of the possibilities of layout can students learn to control and manipulate such factors, to produce the desired piece of design.

Before embarking on the design process, to produce a finished piece, I believed that it would be beneficial to the students to engage in a basic design exercise. Not only was it a good introduction to the module, it acted as a gauge of the overall ability of the class. This exercise involved the design of a 'pictogram' for a particular subject in the Transition Year
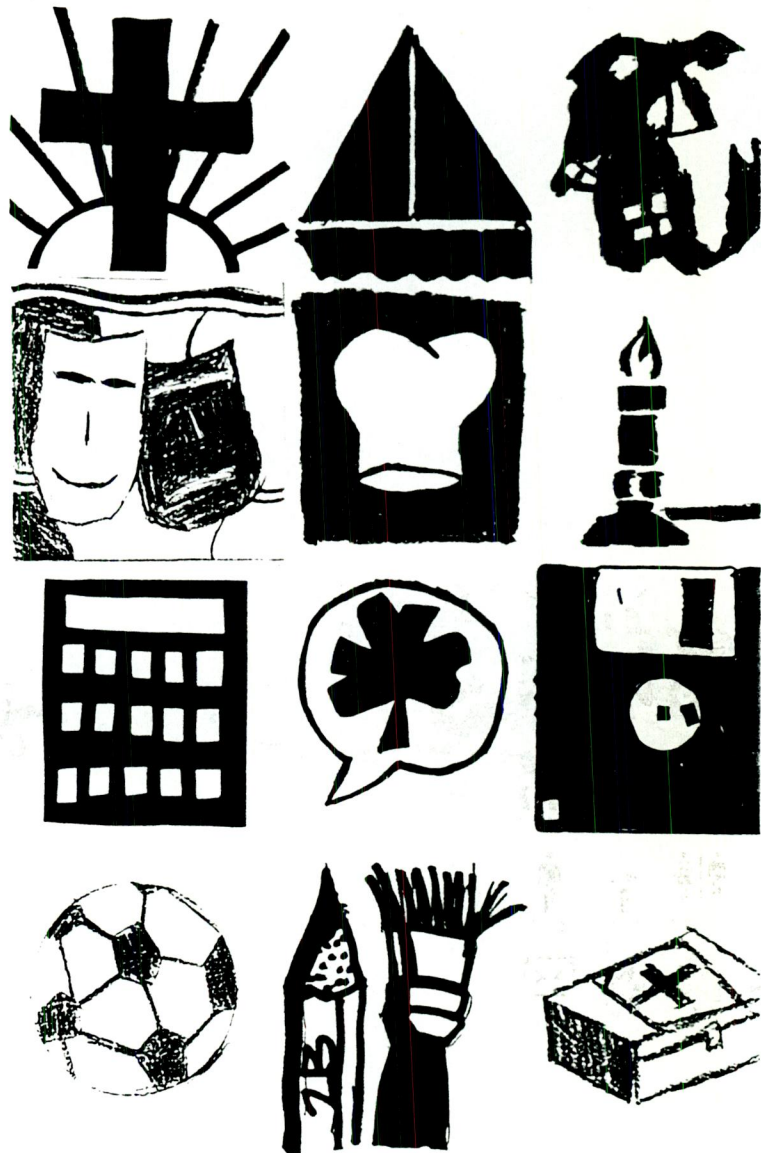
Figure 4 & 5 :
Left: Visual Aid. Selection of common
'pictograms'. A 'pictogram' is a graphic
device that can communicate a message
without the aid of words.
Right: Student Work. Students were asked
to design a pictogram for their favourite
subjects in Transition Year.

DEMONSTRATION: SHOW THE STUDENTS THE MASTHEADS FOR THE 'IRISH TIMES' & 'THE SUN'
* ASK THEM WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES IN THE LETTERING OF EACH?
* WHY DO THEY THINK THAT THIS TYPE OF LETTERING WAS USED?
* EXPLAIN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN 'SERIF' & 'SANSERIF' LETTERING.
* 'THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A BAD DESIGN BUT APPROPRIATE AND INAPPROPRIATE'.
* TALK BRIEFLY ABOUT THE HANDOUT OF THE PARTS OF A CHARACTER.

THE IRISH TIMES

* ASK THEM TO DESCRIBE
THE LETTERING USING
THE HANDOUT AS A
GUIDE.
SANS SERIF / SERIF?
OBLIQUE?
UPPER / LOWER CASE?

THE STAR
FOR ALL THAT MATTERS
DUBLIN MONDAY DECEMBER 2 1996   60p   45p Sterling

Figure 6 :
Visual Aid for an introduction to Typography. How particular fonts or styles of lettering are appropriate for a specific product.

Figure 6.1 :
Selection of imagery from contemporary music magazines.

EbABejg
Uggin
SGLCNR
Otx

jive
RECORDS

Figure 7
Top: Visual Aid relating to the components
of a letter/character.
Bottom: Visual Aid for the logo design
project.

programme. A pictogram is a common graphic device, in which a 'message' can be 'read' visually without the assistance of words. A 'no smoking' sign is a common example (see figure 4). Immediate, practical communication is the primary function of a pictogram. The emphasis in the exercise was on clarity of design and simplicity of ideas.

The exercise proved to be successful on a number of levels. The majority understood the function of a pictogram, and that simple ideas worked best. There is evidence of a high degree of clarity in the designs of the students. Finally, the students without, or limited, experience in art, did not feel alienated by the exercise as the emphasis was on their design concepts rather than on their drawing ability (see figure 5).

Typography or the study of letterforms has always been a difficult area for students and teachers alike. As an introduction, students were shown the logos for the newspapers 'The Irish Times' and 'The Star' (see figure 6). A discussion developed regarding the content of each paper, and how the lettering was appropriate for each paper. Students were given a handout on the different parts of a 'character' or single letter, so that they would acquire the basic language of typography (see figure 7). Practical rendering of lettering was achieved with colouring pencils and tracing paper, as appropriate equipment and materials (i.e. layout paper, a light-box, computer software, ink pens, etc.) were unavailable. As soon as I was satisfied that an acceptable level of understanding was achieved, each student began the next stage. It was found that those with previous art experience advanced before those without.

This was the first stage of the design process. Each student was given an actual CD but without the original artwork. All the student had to work from, was the featured artist and the title of the song. Students were also asked to design a logo for the record company, before beginning to design the cover of the CD. For the logo design, students were restricted in terms of dimensions and colour (the design had to be rendered in black and white). Placing limitations on the students forced them to focus on their design approach, particularly the balance between text and image (see figure 8).

For the CD cover design, students were asked to take the two elements (i.e. the artist's name and song title) and write out a list of all things

CHRYSALIS RECORDS

PD RECORDS

BIZARRE RECORDS

SLASH RECORDS LONDON

JUST RECORDS

LONDON MUSIC L.T.D.

VECTIS RECORDS
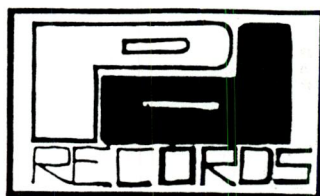
SCREAM RECORDS

NAKED. RECORDS

Figure 8 :
Student work. Selection of logo designs for various record companies. In this basic design exercise, students were restricted in terms of colour and dimensions of design.
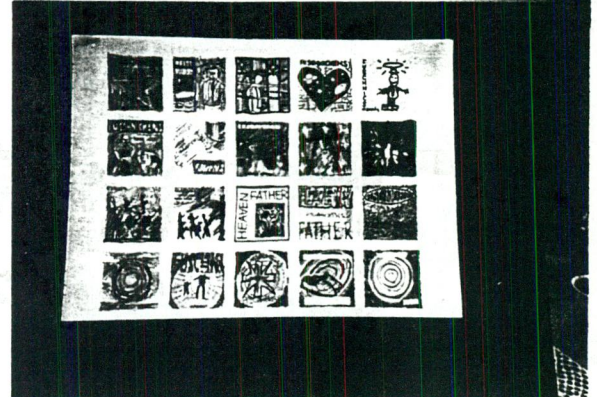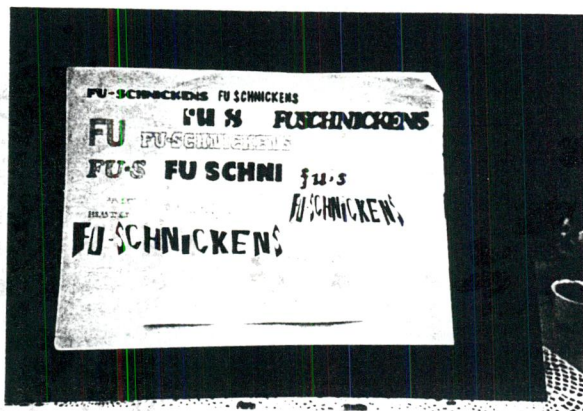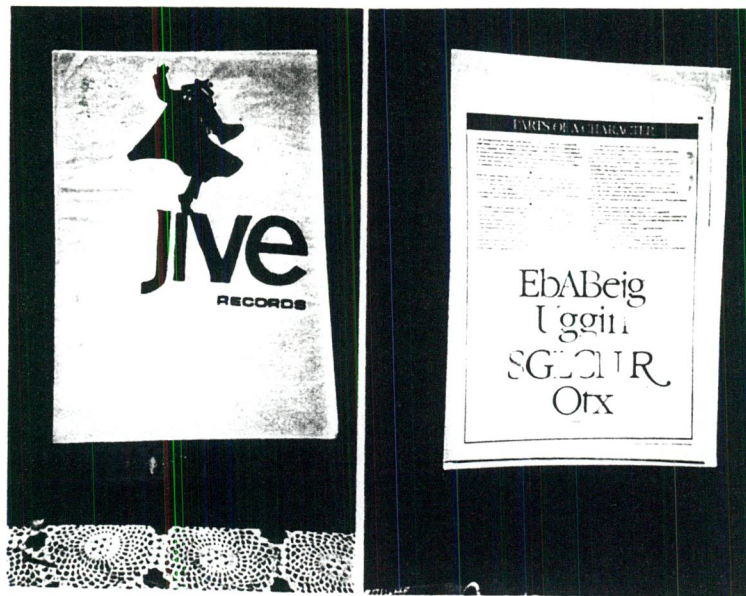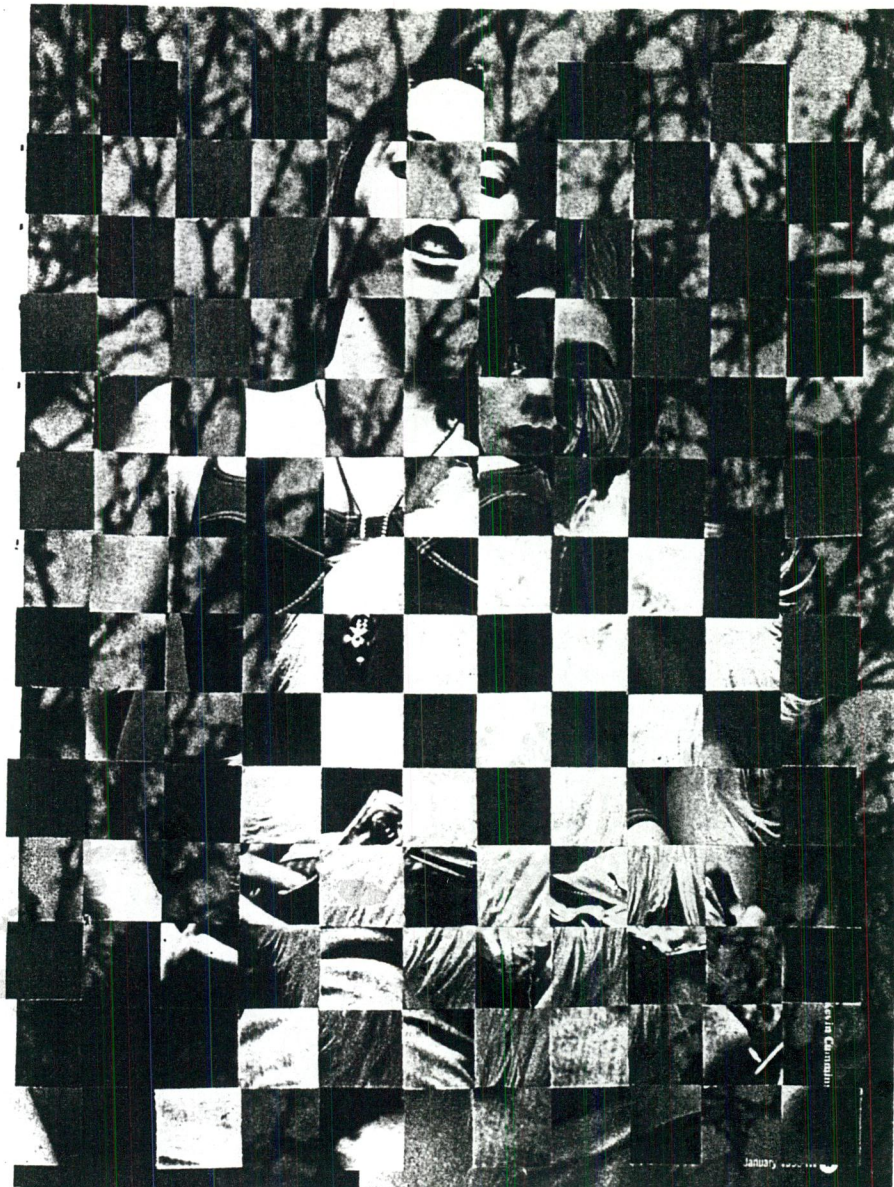
Figure 9.1 :
Selection of Visual Aids for the CD Design
project.

DESIRE   © 95

Figure 9.2 :
Visual Aid. The possibilities of using
magazines as a source for collage is limitless.

Figure 9.3 :
Visual Aid for the CD design. Using magazines
as a source can be an effective (and
resourceful) way to render a design.

Figure 10.1 :
Visual Aid. Thumb-nail sketches are an important step in the design process. All problems relating to a design can be resolved at this early stage.
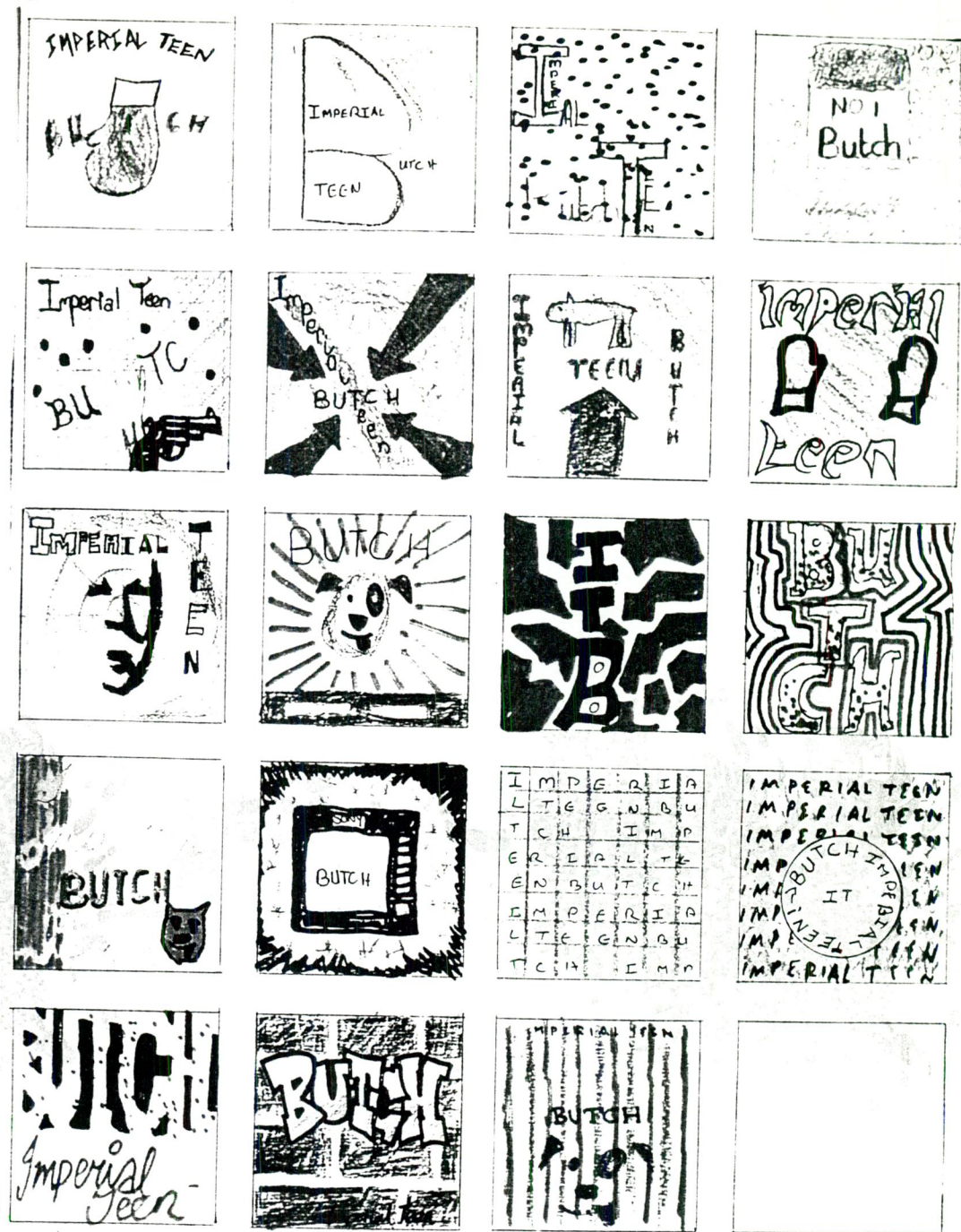
Figure 10.2. :
Student Work. Students were asked to produce as many alternative designs as possible at the thumb-nail stage.

related or inspired by them. The solution, though not always, should lie in the combination of the two elements. This individual brain-storm exercise was an important step in fostering in the students the notion that the seeds of an idea lie within. It also acted in focusing the students on one single concept.

Once the students had chosen an idea, they had to source some imagery that would visually depict their original idea. Successful research depended on the student's determination to find the appropriate imagery to work from. Students were shown how to present all their ideas on a 'styleboard', which consisted of a wide selection of images related to the theme of the design (see figure 9). Students were asked to talk about what style and format their design would possess.

Students were then asked to render their ideas two dimensionally in thumb-nail sketches. These are vital in visualising an idea. Design problems such as the juxtaposition of type and image, the use of colour, the layout and format of the design can all be resolved at this stage. Success depended on the student's ability to critically examine the components of the design composition rather than concentrate on the rendering of the sketches. As the same time, emphasis on presentation was stressed (see figure 10).

Once the thumb-nail sketch had been selected, the next step was to render it in a final form. Ideally, students should have a range of options regarding how their final design can be rendered, but of course, this depended on the budget and resources of the art room. This school did not have the necessary computer software (e.g. QuarkXPress, Photoshop, Freehand) to produce the work in a professional way. At the same time, there is a strong argument that suggests that the best design is produced with heavy restrictions. For this project, students were only allowed to use colour magazines as their source.

The final series of designs were visually clear and, in most cases, communicated the purpose of the design in a direct and uncomplicated way (see figure 11). The project had obvious appeal for the students, who showed a great knowledge of popular culture, and this certainly influenced their designs. They were interested in the work of contemporary designers and typographers, such as Will Bankhead and

Figure 11.1 :
Student Work.

Figure 11.2 :
Student Work.
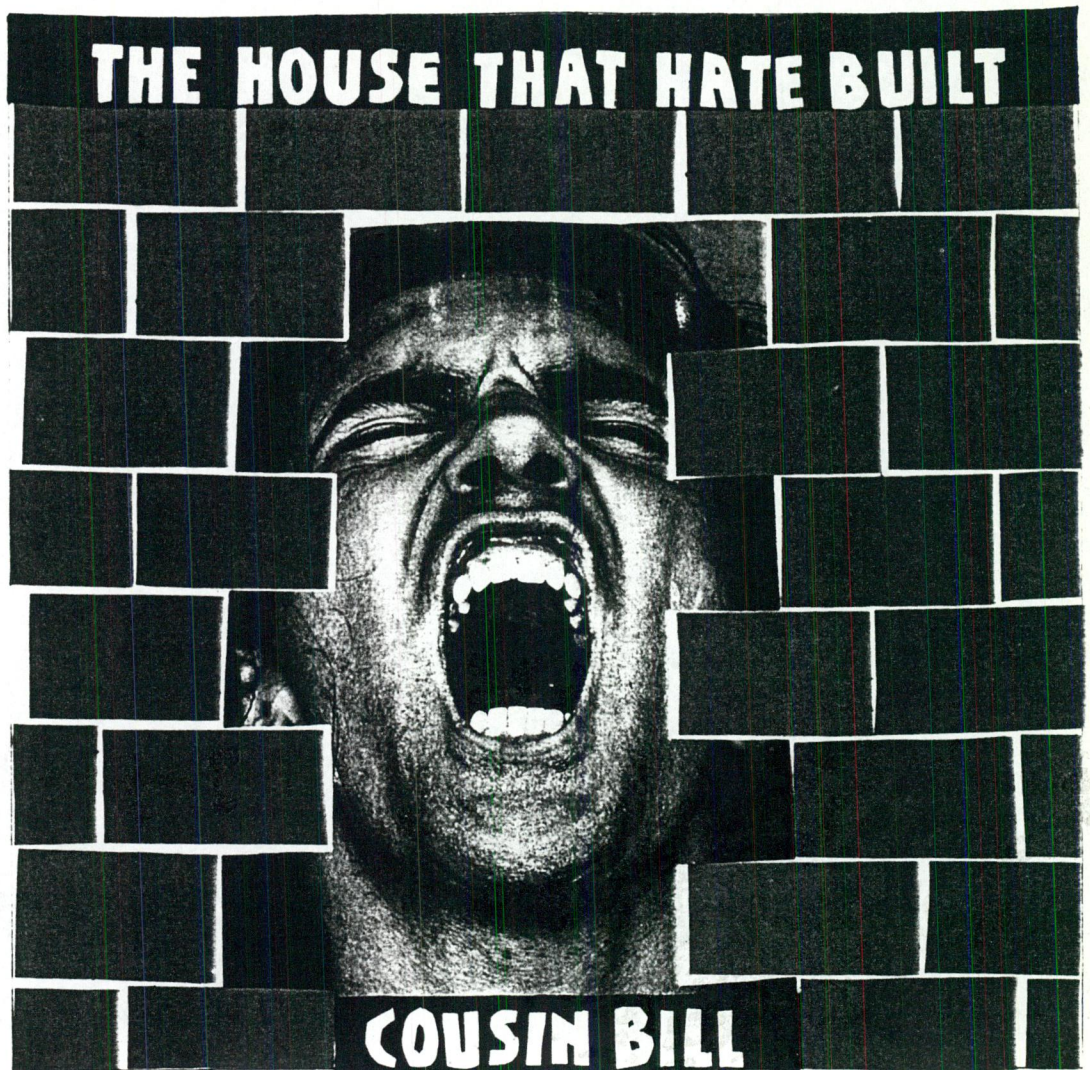
THE HOUSE THAT HATE BUILT

COUSIN BILL

Figure 11.3 :
Student work in progress.

Figure 11.4 :
Student work in progress.

Figure I1.5 :
Student work in progress.

Ben Drury (see figure 12), and brought in examples of design work that they admired. The project suited the students with limited experience in art as the drawing required of them was more technical than representational. Although the continuity of classes was interrupted, students found it relatively easy to pick up where they left off in the design process. The project had appeal in the sense that students felt they were producing an item of design which was functional, and yet at the same time personal. At the end of the module, students were given the original CD cover artwork so they could compare them with their own designs.

Figure 12 :
Support Studies. Students were shown the work of contemporary designers, such as Will Bankhead and Ben Drury. The CD designs above are examples of their work for Mo' Wax Records.

CONCLUSION

It is my belief that Visual Communication is a valuable and important subject area within the Transition Year programme. Although the resources for the art room may vary from school to school, it is possible to create a working module with the bare essentials. The educator will have to be creative on many levels, particularly regarding planning and resources.

It is essential that the educator displays a clear knowledge and understanding of Visual Communication in all it's forms. The module should be designed in such a way that the students can see the relevance of Visual Communication in their own culture. This means that the educator should be broad minded and informed regarding popular culture. The educator should display enthusiasm as this can only help in generating a keen interest about the subject. This is paramount in Transition Year where many of the students may not have had any previous experience in art.

Dealing with mixed ability classes is one of the common problems in Transition Year, and I believe the solution lies in the designing of an appropriate module that will cater for them. The module designed should satisfy both the teaching objectives and the learning outcomes of students. It is important that no student should feel inadequate or uncomfortable in dealing with the practical work, and I believe that tasks should be designed with realistic expectations, but without diluting the learning outcomes.

The Transition Year programme provides an opportunity for educators to create modules based on their own disciplines and background, and looks set to become a permanent fixture in the Irish educational system. Considering the positive consequences of raising the level of visual literacy, visual communication deserves to be given due recognition in the Irish educational system.

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