*Virtual / Multiple / Location / Exhibition*

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The pandemically-induced lockdown commenced in the middle of March. Six months later, in September, the problem was still there.

A problem indeed. Across all industries it was a problem, but as September approached, this problem loomed large and took on a threatening specificity for all involved in the various stages of academia. In everyone’s mind was the same question: what shape would the new academic year take, and could we not only scrape by, but also, thrive?

I teach at the La Camber visual art school, in Brussels, in the third of a five year program. After the first two foundational years, the third is when students interrogate their artistic vision, building their artist DNA through style, identity, and thematic concerns, before cementing this personality in the last two years of their masters and beyond. The university allows me the freedom to formulate my classes within the parameters of the year’s objective, a liberty I greatly appreciate. Each semester, I conduct a six week workshop, which, by nature of its brevity, demands rigour and progress. An onward rhythm that leaves no capacity for slack. It’s a challenge for the students, but for me, too – to improvise, develop, shape, and test out fresh teaching ideas. No two semesters are the same, and this keeps both the students and myself on our toes.

Last year, it was easy. The artist’s energy originates from that which they want to defend, so in the first semester, I asked each student to express the theme of “Personal Revolt” through their photography. In the second, we usually travel. I brought them to Naples, Italy, for a week, a city brimming with spirit, vivacity, in essence, the culmination of the cultural notion, “Popular”. Each student had to capture and interpret this spirit in their photography, which resulted in a range of fascinating, unique pieces. We collaborated with the Naples Academia Delle Belle Arte to exhibit their work in an old palace dedicated to the homeless, and all of us, including the teachers, took part.

The Covid pandemic struck right after we returned from Naples. I’d begun brainstorming for the new semester, but with the country folding itself into various stages of lockdown, access to the world at large was amputated, options narrowed. Visual Art majors in particular suffered – confined for several months in their flats, which were often in very small perimeters, they were cut off from the studios and streets that were once essential to their practical courses and artistic experimentation. My photography students suffered, too. By the time September rolled around, they had already exploited every possibility, having photographed all corners of their bedrooms, the bodies of their roommates, details of garbage, even documenting the rise and fall of each solar cycle from their tiny windows. With no recourse in sight, a sense of despair permeated – these tiny video conferencing classrooms seemed inadequate, it was difficult to find a topic that would keep them awake. Looking back on the unnatural spectacle of the year that had passed, I thought: it was time to upend everything, be more instinctive, less intellectual, to lower our defenses and get at the roots of why were were passionate about photography. It was time to play.

There was something else that had contributed to this decision. I wasn’t immune to the overwhelming frustration at the way life had upended itself; despite feeling lucky to be spending lockdown with family in the country, my work had been severely interrupted by the travel restrictions. I watched my wife adapt her piano lessons for the video conferencing format, I entertained my children with board games, and slowly, instinctively, began documenting these strange times with my camera. Confronted with spare time and no excuse, I also decided to finally sort through, methodically categorize, and store the pile of negatives, prints, and computer files that I’d accumulated over my twenty years as a photographer.

A pattern emerged. I was surprised to see how much time I’d spent testing ideas, embarking on experiments, and pursuing new ways of expression in photography over the years. Most of these experiments had never seen the light of day, but were fundamental for building the style, agility, and artistic personality I have today. Because they were created independent of any exhibitive intent, they were released from the pressure of being refined, and subsisted solely on passion and the desire to be distinctive. I’d conducted these experiments at home, getting up to my elbows in water, oil, working on different papers, testing lights, exploring multiple print textures, exploiting negatives, superposing images, manipulating images digitally on Photoshop and physcially with cutters, playing with kaleidoscopes… birthing collages, distortions, images of images in my quest to locate new visual vocabularies for articulating the ideas and emotions in my head.

How exhilarating these experiments were! Each one contained worlds of hope, play, curiousity; they surprised my younger self with unexpected results, which then led to the europhic feeling of discovery, and more incredibly – the extraordinary sense that these results had surpassed the imaginary world I had set out to define, spinning off branches of new possibilities and wonders. How exceptional, the feeling of standing with an image one had created, with the sense that a new frontier had been brokered, creating an image that no one else had ever come to think of, let alone achieve!  
 Voila. These circumstances converged, and I decided that my students would do the same thing – since we were all confined, it was time to convert situation into opportunity, dip into imagination, and begin to experiment with new ideas we hadn’t had time or courage for before. I encouraged them to lower their defenses and not be afraid of venturing into modes that might otherwise seem useless, I said, lets have fun, let’s set the stage for our results to surprise us. In a confined world, let us live with our minds open to anything.

“Experiment” would be September’s workshop topic, the only artistic requirement being their imagination.

The assignment was deceptively simple. They would be graded not on technical proficiencies, but on their ability to give themselves over to intuition, to follow an idea through, and to later achieve a singularity in messaging, in a final project where artistic intentions should be precise and clear. I asked that they delve into their archives and retrieve the pieces they’d once dismissed as useless, but that later echoed in work that they were proud of, that represented their style and DNA as an artist accurately. I hoped that like me, they would return to the origins of research, distilling the beginnings of intentions, and at the end of it all, parse through the sense of free play to identify the seeds that would germinate into their next, fully realized pieces of work.

While the students embarked on the first weeks of the project, my colleagues and I privately discussed the ironies inherent to the assignment. How could we ask students to experiment, promise them complete freedom, without a topic or direction given, yet negotiate control back from them later in order to transform the experience into a learning opportunity?

I found my answer in Bernard Rime’s book, “The Social Sharing of Emotions.” Full of references to existing research and ideas, the book was a panorama of the current discourse on emotions such as guilt, shame, anxiety, love, disgust, fear, anger, sadness, joy. It begun by attempting to understand the origin and history of emotions, before exploring the reasons for the speed, repetition, and spread of emotions in society. A particular sentence in the book startled me, and ended up inspiring the way I framed the workshop:

“George Mandler (1984) was talking about two occasions that could generate emotions: Emotions are generated when something you did not expect happens, and when something you did expect does not happen.”

It logically followed that there were two other, less emotionally intense situations possible – things you expected happening, or things you didn’t expect not happening. I deducted that the most intensely felt emotions originated from the feeling of surprise.

To my students, I said: what of your past experiments surprised you? Which images would you keep if you had to select only a few? Locate, and use those.

With surprise as a selction criteria, the precision of each student’s experimentation process sharpened. Repetition and cliches were culled, images were layered into complexity, and slowly but surely, in the series of images they pulled together, a story was built.

For the final presentation, since a physical exhibition at the university gallery was out of the question, we agreed that each student would individually exhibit their work in their present environments. They would act as curator, photographing their works in an identical format, with an accompanying text justifying their choices of location, methods of hanging, so on and so forth. Together, the class would form its first “virtual multiple location” exhibition. Here were the formal requirements: 35mm, frontal, and with lighting perfectly balanced – but within these constraints, their individual artistic spirits should bloom. Not so different, actually, from the present ways in which we lived.

This is what they did.