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### Precedent

Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds*, first published in 1934, changed everything for the nascent sport of birding. Before the guide, birding was practiced largely by hunters and academics. The identification of species was conducted on a bird in the hand, the result of hunting, or a specimen delivered to a laboratory. Ornithological training was required to accurately identify a bird and to place it in the phylogenetic taxonomy. *A Field Guide to the Birds* proposed a simple, but revolutionary thesis: A bird can be identified quickly and accurately in the field based on its unique visual qualities.

Throughout his life, Roger Tory Peterson drew pictures of birds. He began in seventh grade when a teacher suggested he Join a Junior Audubon Club. He became quickly engrossed in drawing and watching birds. By the time he finished high school, Peterson claimed to know the existing *Reed's Pocket Guide to Birds* by heart. This fat, checkbook-sized volume included, on each spread, a portrait and a descriptive text of each of the common species. Peterson's field sketches of birds led him to pursue a career in art. He studied at the Art Students League (1927-1928) and the National Academy of Design (1929-1931) in New York City. Living in New York, he met many of the leading ornithologists, including Ludlow Griscom. Griscom had developed the idea of field marks, which can be used to distinguish one bird from another at a distance. Peterson was exposed to a larger group of people who shared his fascination with birds. He left New York convinced that a guide arranged visually rather than biologically would find an audience.

*Peterson's Field Guide* was a synthesis of several existing ideas, and he credited his visual training with enabling him to develop the concept. *A Field Guide to the Birds* organized the birds not through ornithology, but rather by visual similarities of form and structure. The Chimney Swift was placed with the Sparrows, because they looked the same. The Philadelphia Vireo and Ruby-Crowned Kinglet were compared with the confusing Fall Warblers. This was radical.

Further, the drawings of the birds were not handsome portraits like the paintings in *Reed's Pocket Guide to Birds*, but were purposely diagrammatic. On a plate that included six to ten birds, arrows point to the unique visual characteristics that could be used to accurately identify that bird from all of the others in the guide. The Wood Pewee is distinguished by its conspicuous wing bars and yellow bill, and the Western Kingbird by its yellow belly and black tail. This system of visual notation was called the Peterson Identification System.

Finding a publisher for the new guide was difficult. Peterson's manuscript, including illustrations and his meticulously terse text, was rejected at four New York publishing houses. Houghton Mifflin agreed to publish the book, but considered it such a gamble that they could not pay royalties on the first one thousand of the two thousand copies to be printed. Peterson accepted immediately. The first printing of two thousand copies ot the field guide sold out in a matter of days. *A Field Guide to the Birds* is currently in its fourth edition, and has inspired numerous imitators.

By arranging birds according to their visual differences and rendering these differences clearly, the field guide opened up birding to a broad audience. Birds could now be identified in the field rather than in the hand. Peterson replaced the rifle with field binoculars and, in doing so, he turned "looking" into a viable sport.

# The Importance of Field Studies

Friday, September 3, 1999, page B1, *New York Times* Metro Section: "A Field Guide to New York City Busses."<sup>2</sup> The half-page graphic stopped me as I flipped through the paper. Presented in a derivative of the Peterson Identification System were seven species of New York City busses. There was a diagrammatic drawing of each kind, a map showing their range, a terse description, and a name. I was compelled to study this guide. I wasn't driven by an innate fascination with busses, but, instead, because I see these specimens daily moving through their city habitat. Before, I had only the crude word "bus" to describe what I saw plodding down the street. After studying the field guide, I had a new language. In the following days and weeks, my world expanded slightly and I could see what was invisible to me before, it was no ionger a bus that stopped to pick me up or rolled up 10th Avenue, it was an RTS-04, an Over The Road. or maybe an Orion 5, distinguished by its flat front and boxy shape. Since encountering this Field Guide, I have become a buswatcher of sorts, able to identify all seven types easily, and only recently experiencing the thrill of spotting the Nova L.F.S, only one of which is known to travel New York City streets. This connection between design, language, and my daily experience in the city was powerful.

In Elements of Visual Language, the class that I teach at the New York University Interactive Telecommunications Program, I emphasize that design yields meaning when it makes connections to existing sets of conditions and other bodies of knowledge. This is something that I learned in graduate school, specifically in a set of assignments given by Paul Elliman at Yale University. He stressed the explicit connection to another body of knowledge by giving a thematic topic to his classes, whether it was the clouds, the night sky or public transport.

My class at NYU is filled with students from varied backgrounds. They are beginning the two-year graduate program and the course is required. For many, it is the first formal class that they have had in graphic design. In order to get them started on making visual work right away, I attempt to connect all of the assignments directly to their everyday experience. This is meant to suggest that design is not something done only in a secluded studio, or arrived at by revelation, but is a mundane and direct process of making a series of decisions. The students leave the class and pursue a broad range of electronic projects through their two years of study. One assignment that they complete in my class is to design a field guide.

I try to engage the city with assignments. The field guide assignment requires students to spend a majority of their time in the field (city) looking at small differences in a group of similar objects, and to render these differences clearly. Their Field Guides must communicate concisely and must be useful in the field. The assignment turns in on itself at the end, as I ask that students exchange field guides with one another and spend the next week in the field attempting to use the guide. They document their sightings with photographs.

The city is a system that isn't predictable. Bell Atlantic is switching all of their payphones to Verizon, graffiti have been "erased," downtown C trains have been replaced by E trains for service to World Trade Center making all local stops. By engaging the processes of the city, I want to make explicit that accident, coincident, and external factors are a crucial part of design.

The field guide offers an internal set of criteria for judging its success. It works if it allows small differences to be clearly read in the field. The existing form of the field guide provides a useful set of formal and structural conventions for the students to respond to. Each design decision can be weighed against the criteria: Is it easier to read the visual differences in my set of things? Students must consider how to represent their objects, by drawing, photography, in isolation, or in context. Finally, the field guide assignment asks students to spend a considerable amount of time looking at similarities and differences. The assignment stresses formal connections within a set of things, which is a part of what graphic design can do well.

Many have pursued a serial working method which suggests the process of a field guide. Wlison Alwyn "Snowflake" Bentley compulsively recorded and cataloged snowflakes.<sup>3</sup> In 1884, at age nineteen, he began making photomicrographs through an inexpensive telescope, and continued throughout his life. In total, he recorded 5,381 individual snowflakes, no two the same. A farmer by trade, he cataloged other visual phenomena, including daily weather, using a consistent notation system: the sizes of raindrops (developing a system still in use), 649 auras that he searched for in the evening, and even the smiles of actress Mary Pickford. Bentley's original subject was his most successful. His photographs of snowflakes reveal a visual structure not immediately visible, and they made permanent a transient experience (the falling snow). He wasn't taken seriously by the scientific community until late in his life. Perhaps his method, rooted in looking at visual similarities and differences, was a challenge to a formal scientific education.

Artist Ed Ruscha has often worked in series, making books of typologies with small collections of photographs.<sup>4</sup> In 1963, he made his first, Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations. It was a collection of filling stations that he had often seen while driving from his birthplace in Oklahoma City to his residence in Los Angeles. Other books followed, including *Various Small Fires, Some Los Angeles Apartments, Thirty-Four Parking Lots,* and *Nine Swimming Pools*. In these works, the photographs reveal the wide variety of visual forms that exist inside one category. William Eggleston's Guide, his seminal book of color photographs of Mississippi and Tennessee, uses a similar approach.<sup>5</sup> German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher provided some of the best known typologies. They made exhaustive catalogs of common structures, grouped together to reveal visual similarities and differences. *Cooling Towers Wood-Steel* is a collection of nine photographs made between 1959 and 1977. The straight photographs are presented as a collection, rendering the differences visible.

In the film *Smoke*, by Paul Auster and Wayne Wang, Auggie Wren owns a tobacco store in Brooklyn that is the locus of the story. Auggie has a collection of photographs spanning fifteen years that he has made at the same time each day from the same location just outside of the storefront. He has arranged the photographs chronologically in endless albums. The motivation for this project is never revealed, but Auggie seems to be following the systematic method of a field guide.

#### The Assignment

This is the assignment as given to "Elements of Visual Language" class at New York University Interactive Telecommunications Program:

Design a field guide.

- 1. Find a set of seven to fifteen similar things readily available in the New York City habitat.
- 2. Record them, (Photographs can be made in context [field pholography] or in a controlled.

setting [studio photography]. Drawings can be used. Other methods are possible. This depends on what you wish to communicate.)

3. Make "a pictorial key using obvious similarities and differences of form and structure."

(Your field guide can be any finished size, but must fold down to a size that someone [me] could take with them and use in the field [city]. It may be produced in any way that you want: photocopy, color photocopy, computer printout.)

### Here are some field guide notes;

- A field guide is about the small differences between similar things
- A field guide is based on the visual differences
- One thing that design can do well is to render these visual differences clearly
- A collection should be homogeneous so that small differences can be read
- A field guide is based on direct, in the field, observation
- You should use things readily found in New York City environment

# **Responses and Findings**

Responses to the assignment vary along consistent lines. I try to make it clear that the clever choice of a subject for the field guide is not important. The subject should be readily available in the city. The subjects should be as similar as possible, so that small differences can be clearly rendered. The most important part of the activity is the close looking and deciding how to communicate these differences. Often, two students will choose the same subject.

One successful response was *A Field Guide to Waste Receptacles* in Manhattan. This guide is approximately 4" x 6" and accordion-folded. It is largely white with a series of photographs of public trashcans, each silhouetted, one per panel. The descriptions and names are given on the reverse. Clearly presented, the sequence of trashcans immediately makes legible the differences in the eight kinds. These differences are largely in the outline shape of the trashcans.

Another response was *A Field Guide to Manhole Covers*. A popular topic, but this time it was done differently. The student chose to concentrate on one city block, 22nd Street between Park Avenue South and Fifth Avenue. Square-format photographs of the manhole covers are presented in a grid. The visual differences can be clearly read. Additionally, the texture and astounding variety of manholes found on that single block makes a nice connection to the infinite visual variety available in the city.

A third response, *A Held Guide to Street Vending Carts*, was produced by a student who was coincidentally pursuing a degree in Oceanography. The topic had been attempted previously with limited success. In this guide, the street-vendor carts are organized by the number of umbrellas, and a colored generic silhouette opens each section. Following the opening are specific photographs of the street vending cart specimens as seen in the field. The move from generic to specific makes the differences in vending-cart types clear.

The inevitable dividend of the assignment is the other body of knowledge. In the process of making design and satisfying the criteria, students learn about payphones, trashcans, city birds, manhole covers, curb finishes, busses, police uniforms, and paving patterns. This is useful.

# NOTES

- 1. Roger Tory Peterson, A Field Guide to the Birds (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934).
- 2. David W. Dunlap and Al Granberg, "A Field Guide to New York City Busses" in New York Times Metro
- Section, B1 (New York: Tne New York Times, September 3,1999).
- 3. Joe Laniado, "Cold Comfort" in Frieze issue 53 (London: Durian Publications Ltd., 2000).
- 4. Neal Benezara and Kerry Brougher, Ed Ruscha (Zurich: Scalo, 2000).
- 5. William Eggleston, William Eggieston's Guide (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976).
- 6. Peter C. Bunnell, Photography at Princeton (Princeton: The Art Museum, Princeton University, 1998),
- 7. Paul Auster and Wayne vVang, smone and Blue In the Face: Two Films (New York: Miramax Books, 1995).