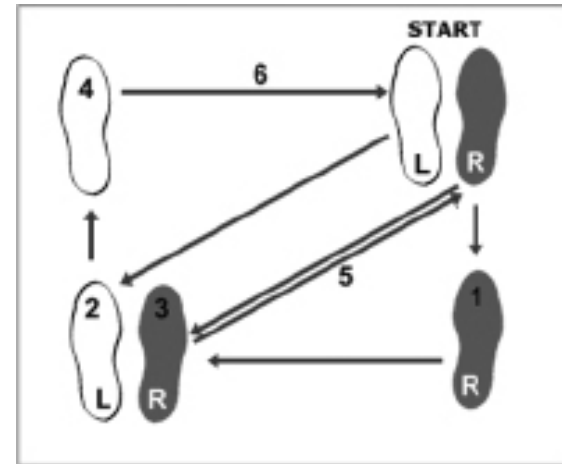
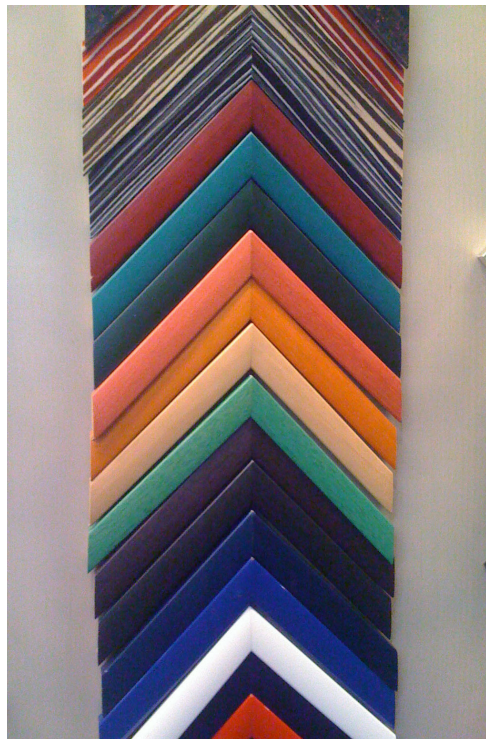


Lost in Translation: Do you see what I read?

by *Matt Keegan*

I recently visited Melbourne, Australia, for a two-person show with Dane Mitchell. At customs, an officer inspected my luggage and a cardboard parcel that contained framed photographs that I was couriering to the exhibition. ‘What’s in here?’ he asked. ‘Framed photos,’ I replied. ‘Are they timber?’ he inquired about the frames. ‘Yes, they are wood,’ I said. Clearing customs, I thought about ‘timber’ and how the word elicits an image of a tree (in this case, maple) being cut down and milled to make frame profiles. Timber is both material and manufacture in one word. Wood, on the other hand, becomes generic—without a lineage, and static. Always wood—before and after.

The accuracy of this word choice triggered the memory of my favourite language anecdote, relayed by my friend Sean who studied abroad in Japan. Early into his semester Sean was at an informal school get together, talking to a Japanese classmate. After some initial banter Sean asked, ‘so, do you like to dance?’ To which his new friend replied, ‘my technology of the disco is ugly.’ How could anyone say ‘I’m a bad dancer’ ever again?



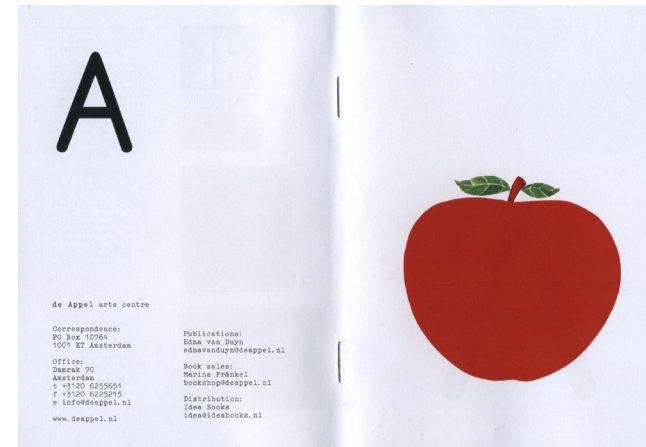
My mother teaches English as a second language (ESL), and between the early 1990s and early 2000s she gave ESL evening classes to adults in suburban Long Island, New York. To facilitate teaching, she created image-based flash cards for her lessons. Hand-assembled from magazines, newspapers, and other print media, her selections mainly draw from stock and advertorial photos traditionally used to sell commercial products. My mother repurposed these reproductions to illustrate words and concepts related to her weekly language course.

Making work for *Image Transfer*, a group show currently installed at the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, I decided to revisit my mother’s flash cards as source material. Her teaching archive is stored in a closet in her home and, going through her collection, I was surprised by the quantity of images that she had amassed—approximately 400 double-sided cards gathered over a decade. As I went through each laminated sheet, I immediately found this compilation to be compelling for a variety of reasons: first and foremost, her chosen photos are a fascinating yet perplexing utility as language learning aids.

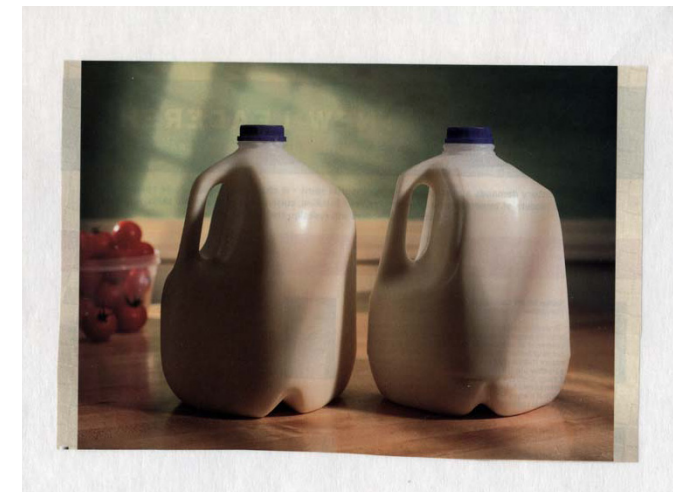
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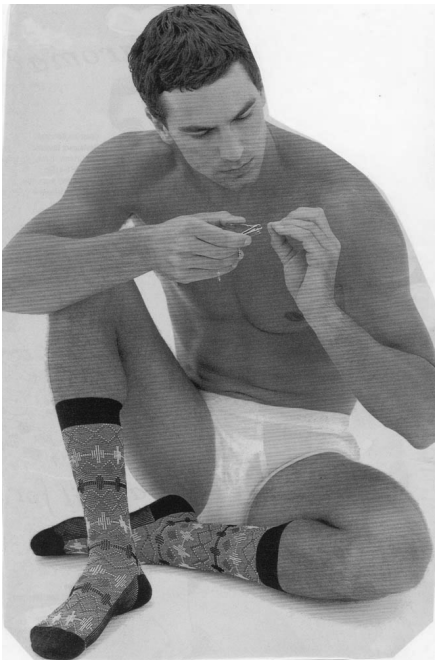
Will Holder reconfigured the design and visual identity of Dutch art institution de Appel. An artist engaged with language and editing, Holder appropriated the foundational learning phrase ‘A is for Apple’, reusing the institutions original logo from 1975. On the venue’s website (www.deappel.nl) and its exhibition ephemera, the ‘A’ usually appears in the upper left-hand corner, and an illustration of an apple resides right of centre, claiming most of the page. I am not a semiotician, and I do not believe in universalist concepts, yet this basic correlation appears to have near-global legibility. A is for apple. Apple is A. The two are interchangeable.



Within my mother’s flash card collection, there are examples that trigger an obvious word correlation, but such clear and concise translation makes up only a small percentage of her sizeable set. Finding image-word equivalents is not easy. The role that subjectivity plays in both translation and interpretation quickly becomes apparent. Each card points to the lack of immediate legibility, and thus the complexity, that her collection attempts to stage. Here are some examples of photographs that should elicit an immediate word correlative:

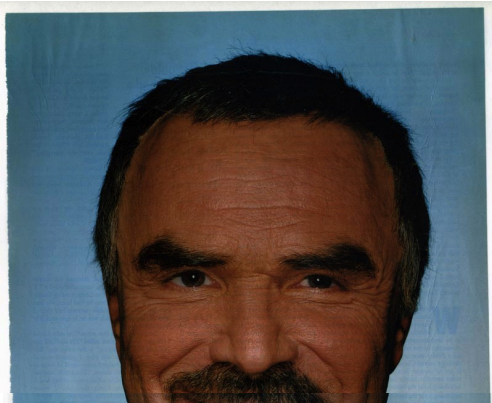


The vast majority of her picture cards are unable to succinctly invoke more complex and diverse words and phrases. The absurdity of finding a photo to illustrate the verb ‘grooming’, for example, is an endlessly intriguing image-language exercise. What my mother has chosen is just as valid as any other related image that could depict ‘grooming’. As a language tool, perhaps it is more productive that this reproduction calls to mind other possibilities that could (and would) also make sense as visual companions. Brainstorming a more accurate image would require students to apply their comprehension of the learned concept into visual terms. Such a generative activity could eventually formulate a compelling visual lexicon.



If my mother used a photo of a smiling Burt Reynolds to identify the adjective ‘happy’, what would the image be for ‘actor’, or ‘masculine’, or ‘moustache’? The Marlborough Man also makes his way into my mother’s archive, but is used to either illustrate the concept of ‘cowboy’ or ‘smoker’. Identities become secondary, replaced with a demand for a basic way of looking that attempts to literalise what the camera presents to us. This way of indexing images is aligned with the functionality of stock photography, a genre that determines categories even before the shutter is released.

Companies that purchase stock photographs enliven them with a specific context. The marketing copy that accompanies an advertisement helps to frame the stock image, whether of a staged family, couple, or styled objects. Interestingly, my mother removed the text that accompanied her carefully selected advertorial photos—her word application determined the scenario. She was both art director and copy editor. For that week’s language lesson, Burt Reynolds was ‘happy’, because she said so.



My mother made her flash-cards to teach predominantly Central and South American immigrants. The image-language collection is emphatically American and it is representative of middle-class aspiration and consumption—traits that were relevant to the desires of the members of her class. My mother’s students were employed as poorly-compensated day labourers and food service staff. The development of more proficient language skills would benefit them, but also help them participate in the education of their children or other younger family members.



In the next ten years, Spanish-speaking residents are expected to make up the majority of the population in the United States. This may even result in the US becoming a bi-lingual country. If such a shift were to happen, how could these flash cards be used? Can Burt Reynolds also be *feliz*? I’ve been told that in the UK, socio-economic standing can be deciphered through the way someone speaks. There is not such a clear way to interpret class within the States. There is, however, strong opinion of who speaks ‘proper’ Spanish. My Cuban maternal grandmother would voice her disdain for the way New York-based Puerto Ricans and Dominicans spoke her native tongue. How could such a varied engagement with a language be mainstreamed into the shared space of the classroom? Could culturally specific readings and word choice also eventually facilitate a dictionary of possible image-language translations? Again, these cards begin to overflow with possible definitions.



Although it was not her intention, my mother’s archive generated a peculiar and particular snapshot of the cultural moment of the 1990s. With the recent US midterm elections, Democratic and Republican candidates belaboured the rhetoric of ‘championing the working class’. Ageing somewhere between 10 and 20 years old, these middle-class attuned images cast a light on the dramatic decline of this representative constituency that maintained stability during the Clinton years (cue images of saxophones cigars, free trade, and memories of financial potency). The cropped and hand-cut photos capture a cultural moment that is frozen within their laminate. In keeping with their perplexing utility as a language-learning tool, the images also present an equally provocative and perverse record of a decade’s mediated dreams and desires. Whether requesting a student or museum viewer to engage this set to elicit memory or meaning, this collection proposes endless speculation. Such basic looking becomes quite complex, and what you see requires endless permutation to determine what you may get.



That is that. Eso si que es.

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Image Transfer: Pictures in a Remix Culture,
Henry Art Gallery, Washington,
2 October 2010 – 23 January 2011