

# Aliens & Creativity: the visual practice-led inquiries of a foreigner

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## Abstract

This paper will describe an ongoing relationship between foreignness and practice-led visual research. Framed by the writings of Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser and using a autobiographical tone, the author will describe photographic research projects generated while living as an “alien” in Japan, India and Turkey. Each of the projects described evolved from a dialogue with one’s unfamiliar surroundings and sought to make “creative sense” of those surroundings. Over time, the experience of creatively responding to those surroundings began to initiate internal dialogues leaving one to question not only the unfamiliar surroundings but also the familiar surroundings from which one came. Furthermore, each concluded project influenced the next, which not only allowed the practice to develop critically, but also created awareness of a practice-led approach to learning that could be employed as a tool. Through making an implicit relationship explicit, it is hoped that the paper will increase awareness of an “aesthetics of familiarity” within practice-led research and enable researchers to critically reflect upon its role.

**KEYWORDS:** Practice-led, Aesthetics of Familiarity, Vilém Flusser, Photography, Foreignness

## Introduction

In a conversation with Quentin Bajac, the photographer Paul Graham described photography as setting out with the best possible idea, opening your door, going outside, and allowing the world to change that idea and shift any expectations that you may have had (Bajac & Geftner, 2013, p59). For any practitioner of any discipline, it is difficult not

to relate to such a description. It is also an adequate description for individuals who leave their country in search of new experiences (i.e. a plan is typically devised but changes in accordance with the reality of the places and people encountered). This is what happened to this author.

Following an undergraduate education in Fine Arts, I worked in a commercial photography studio acquiring skills with digital photography that I had not previously learnt during my degree. Realizing that a career in commercial photography was not for me, a series of coincidences led to becoming an English teacher in Japan. Having little knowledge of Japanese culture, and having made few preparations, the move was risky. I became what the Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser may describe as a “voluntary exile,” a person who chooses to be expelled (Flusser, 2003).

## Flusser and the aesthetics of familiarity

Vilém Flusser was born into a Jewish family in Prague, and studied philosophy until the Nazi occupation in 1939 prompted he and his wife to flee to the UK where he studied at the London School of Economics. Following emigration to Brazil, Flusser worked for Czech-based companies before teaching at several schools in São Paulo, eventually becoming a visiting professor at University of São Paulo. In 1972, he moved to the south of France, where he wrote and actively toured Europe lecturing before tragically dying in a car accident in 1991.

Flusser’s writings are the result of Flusser himself continuously translating, and thereby shifting his ideas, from essay to essay. Key themes in his work involve the technical universe, writing, translation, photography, digital media and migration. For this author, a key aspect of his writings was Flusser’s own experiences as a migrant. In one essay, Flusser describes himself as having “been expelled not only many times, but also in a number of different ways” (Flusser, 2002, p.105). Observations from his experiences as a migrant are reflected in the following essays: *Taking up residence in homelessness*, written in 1987, *Habit: The True Aesthetic Criterion*, written in 1990, and *Exile and Creativity*, written in 1984. In *Taking up residence in homelessness* Flusser points to a direct connection between idleness and the environment in which you engage on a familiar basis. Referring to an example of the slippers under his bed in a village he knows well, Flusser notes how everything appears pretty but not beautiful. Only when the

covers are pulled away is the ugliness revealed. For Flusser, familiarity and unfamiliarity play key roles in the understanding of aesthetics and experience, a concept that he expands upon in *Habit: The True Aesthetic Criterion*. Habit is a governing principle that determines ones' experience of an object: if something begins as ugly, it will become beautiful before becoming pretty, and then become kitsch before becoming ugly again. Although this cycle is comprehensive, it does not allow for the unexpected terror of something completely new (Flusser, 2002, p.56). It is therefore not a perfect cycle, but still a cycle nonetheless.

The essay "Exile and creativity" deals more directly with the act of expulsion from a familiar place and into an unfamiliar place. Flusser notes that it is only by making "creative sense" of the surroundings, can one remain calm and "not go to the dogs." (Flusser, 2002, p.104) This "creative sense" for Flusser is transforming surrounding information into meaningful messages in order to make it liveable. It takes place through a harmonizing of what he refers to as "internal" and "external" dialogues", which transform not only the expelled, but also the world and people around them. For Flusser, exile, whether it is voluntary, forced or economic, is intrinsically linked to creation and is synonymous with an act of freedom: the freedom to remain different from others. Creativity is, for the expelled, a means of survival.

In *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (2000), Flusser analyzes photography through a series of short texts: *The Image*, *The Technical Image*, *The Apparatus*, *The Gesture of Photography*, *The Photograph*, *The Distribution of Photographs*, *The Reception of Photographs*, and *The Photographic Universe*. Through this journey, Flusser highlights the lack of freedom present within the medium of photography. Part of this is owing to a dependence upon a cycle of familiarity and unfamiliarity, which ensures that photographers play *with* a predefined (albeit vast) number of possibilities believed to be "new". In order to traverse the camera's program, Flusser proposes four means of attaining freedom by playing *against* the camera and its program, that is, doing things that are not expected by the camera and its program,

*First, one can outwit the camera's rigidity. Second, one can smuggle human intentions into its program that are not predicted by it. Third, one can force the camera to create the unpredictable, the improbable, the informative. Fourth, one can show contempt for the camera and its creations and turn one's interest away from the thing in general in order to concentrate on information. (Flusser, 2000, p80)*

These approaches may appear simple but they are equally exposed to a cycle of familiarity and unfamiliarity. In other words, successful attempts to play against the camera are inevitably absorbed by the camera's program.

In 2006, this author came across the writings of Flusser by chance while browsing an aisle of English language books in a library in Osaka, which immediately struck a resonating chord. As an exile (voluntary and economic), I had deliberately placed myself within an unfamiliar environment, where I was (according to my foreigner's registration card) an "alien". As the surroundings were unfamiliar to me, Japan was strange, but I sought to discover more through lens-based media. However, in using photography, I was not only faced with the necessity of making creative sense of my surroundings but I was also faced with an ever-decreasing lack of freedom within my tools. Flusser's writings would not only retrospectively resonate with experiences had, but they would also provide a theoretical frame for the experiences that were to follow. Drawing upon remarks from Flusser's essays, the following sections will describe projects produced in relation to the places I was then living.

## Making creative sense (Osaka, 2003-2006)

*Exile is an ocean of chaotic information. [...] Because exile is extraordinary, it is uninhabitable. To be able to live there, the expellee must first transform the information swirling about him into meaningful messages; that is he must process the data [...] If he is not to perish, the expellee must be creative. (Flusser, 2003, p.81)*

To the best of my memory, the Hampshire countryside of the UK that I was leaving, and which I had called home for 23 years, was rich in variations of green. By stark contrast, the landscape of Osaka to which I moved in 2003 was multiple shades of grey, with little green to speak of. With its visual banality by day, the city was visually alive at night. One significant feature of the urban landscape that caught my attention was the number of traffic lights. Unlike the UK, the urban planning of the city of Osaka, which was arranged predominantly as a grid oriented from North to South and East to West, had a set of traffic lights at almost every crossroad and junction. This plethora of traffic lights drove me to observe their sequences, often photographing and filming them for the duration of a

complete sequence: from red to green to red again.

Having collected photographs and short films of the traffic lights, I began to rearrange them in what Flusser described as “meaningful messages”. For *Guiding Lights* (2005), I traced a line from the office where I worked to the place where I resided, filming each traffic light at every junction along the way. Shot at night and featuring one full sequence of each light, the resulting videos were rearranged according to the time it took to change from red to green, and then all situated within a single screen that was projected onto the ceiling of a gallery space (Figure 1). Due to limitations of the software used to compose the single screen, each of the lights had been sped up, giving the impression that they were blinking like stars in a night sky. For *Go* (2006), I focused on a specific grid within the design of Osaka’s streets. Focusing on streets that ran north and south from *chuō dōri* (Central street), I identified enough junctions with traffic lights to trace the basic structure of a chessboard (64 squares), before filming 64 traffic lights and transplanting them to a single screen. While maintaining the original duration of the lights’ sequences, this project differed in that filming of the lights alternated between day and night in order to recreate a checkerboard effect. When installed on a horizontally placed LCD monitor in the centre of the gallery space, visitors to the installation were encouraged to play a game of chess using glass pieces which allowed the video sequences beneath to be seen (Figure 2). The rules remained the same but with one exception: players need not wait to take turns before moving a piece, providing the light beneath the piece was showing green.

Through filming, compositing and installing *Guiding Lights* and *Go*, a large amount of time had been spent observing the streets and identifying patterns. This level of pattern recognition continued with *Escalate* (2006), a random-playing never-ending film that featured the view from all 234 escalators contained within the Osaka city subway system during Spring 2006 (Figure 3). Filmed from an escalator step with the lens pointing away from it, the film documented the people that stand or walk up/down the escalator, as well as capture the variety of interior design within the stations. Forever looping and caught in a motion of moving up or down without ever embarking or disembarking, the film served to illustrate the frustrations of the city’s inhabitants, and the increasing familiarity which I had acquired with Osaka’s urban landscape.

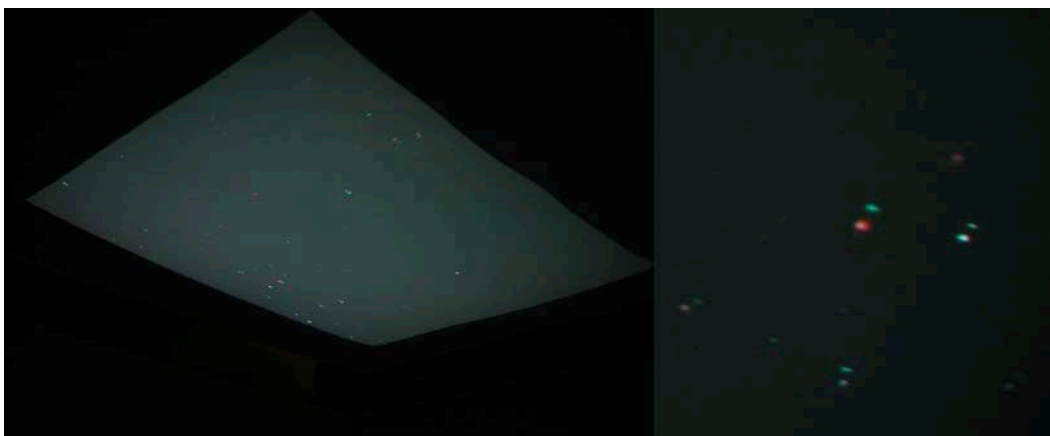


Figure 1 shows the video installation *Guiding Lights* (2005). Left is the work as installed at the Early Gallery in Osaka in 2005. Right is a detail of traffic lights.

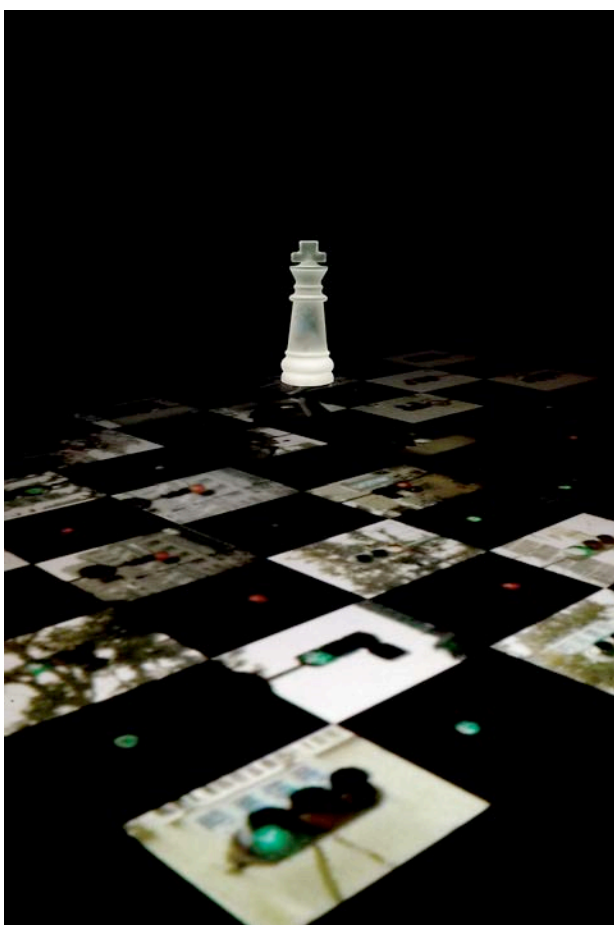


Figure 2 shows a promotional detail of *Go* (2006), a video chessboard made from the traffic lights of Osaka, as installed at Gallery HOT in Osaka in 2006.



**Figure 3 shows two views of *Escalate* (2006), a random-playing never-ending film that presents the view from every escalator in the Osaka City Subway system.**

## External and internal dialogues (Osaka & Tokyo, 2006-08)

*The advent of the expelled in exile leads to “external” dialogues. This causes an industrious creative activity in the vicinity of the expelled. He is a catalyst for the synthesis of new information. If, however, he becomes aware of his uprootedness as his dignity, then an “internal” dialogue begins within himself; which is to say, an exchange between the information he has brought with him, and an entire ocean with waves of information that toss around him in exile. The objective is the creation of meaning between the imported information and the chaos that surrounds him. (Flusser, 2002, p.108)*

In Summer 2006, while searching for old maps of Japan, I came across photographs of Japanese landscapes taken in 1875 during the voyage of HMS *Challenger* (1872-1876), a British research vessel that voyaged around the world measuring the depths of the oceans, examining the constitution of water at various depths, and studying the distribution of organic life throughout the seas explored. In addition to the expedition’s scientific objectives, it presented an opportunity to visually document the people and places encountered throughout the journey, employing a photographer alongside an official artist and several creative officers of the ship’s crew (Brunton, 2004). Having set sail from my hometown 107 years prior to my existence, intrigue drove me to seek further information about the expedition and its photographs.

*Challenger* visited Japan between April and June 1875, anchoring first in Yokohama, Yokosuka (for scheduled repairs), and Kobe before returning to Yokohama and leaving for Hawaii. The two-month stay proved popular. As Japan had not been open for trade up until 1868, it was unfamiliar, exotic, and therefore new and exciting for many of the crew. Having lived in contemporary Japan for three years up to this point, the

locations in each of the photographs appeared familiar, and I sought to identify and revisit them to photograph their contemporary vantage points. The results were mixed but nonetheless surprising: a shrine that was built in Yokohama to protect the city from foreigners still stood, but a temple on a mountain plateau in Kobe devoted to worshipping the moon had been razed to the ground by a fire approximately thirty years prior; the dry dock in Yokosuka used to carry out repairs to *Challenger* was still a dry dock actively used by the United States Navy, but a river in Kobe had been redirected and the land subsequently filled to make way for a train line (McLeod, 2008a).

The experience of revisiting these sites using the visual method of rephotography (the act of photographing again a photograph from history from the same vantage point) laid a platform for further discussion. According to Mark Klett, rephotography enables people to experience the passing of time, but it also enters them into a conversation about a place over time (Klett et al., 2006: 5). Through revisiting and rephotographing these sites, my attention turned to the prosumer digital SLR that I had used to take the pictures. Despite attempts to replicate the monochromatic appearance of the original images, the digital photographs produced appeared to lack the “duration” also imbued in them. Whereas the original images were created using a prototype collodion process requiring approximately 20-25 minutes of time to prepare, expose, develop and fix; my images by comparison took a fraction of a second. Using the ship’s purchasing records, I identified and obtained a lens similar to the one thought to be used for a number of *Challenger*’s images of Japan: a Dallmeyer Rectilinear 1A wide angle lens. Made in London, this “British Eye” was combined with the same prosumer digital SLR (a contemporary brain), to create a “hybrid camera” that spanned Victorian and digital eras (Figure 4). Flusser wrote of no space for freedom within the automated processes of photography but suggested that it was possible to open up a space for freedom by playing against the camera (Flusser, 2000:81-82). The hybrid camera developed here embodied an act of playing against the camera’s apparatus by bringing together components from two chronologically disparate eras of photography and exploring the results.

When directed at the same sites, the British Eye could theoretically see the view in its entirety, but the coverage provided by the sensor of the prosumer camera could see only part of that same view. By moving the hybrid camera around a fixed point, a large number of photographs could be captured that covered the scene in full, and upon reassembly would form a whole from which a suitable crop could then be made. The aim



was simply to redocument the sites, but this hybridization introduced the “duration” that had previously eluded me. Between each firing of the shutter, within the overlaps of the frames, time moved on: people’s heads were cropped, boats would move in a staccato effect, and the sun would change position. Although I could never see and experience the same moment as the original *Challenger* photographer, I was positioned in the same vantage point in front of a similar scene and experiencing a similar duration.

Using the hybrid camera, I then visited and documented locations that the crew had written about but which had not been officially photographed. Over the course of a year, I documented a variety of views that might attract a contemporary foreigner’s eye: such as the cherry blossom season (Figure 5) or Mount Fuji across a lake featuring tourist-laden pirate ships (Figure 6); but also views that might have been of interest to a Victorian eye: such as a vegetable field (Figure 7), or a deep expanse of cedar trees deep within a valley. As the number of photographs grew, the more I found myself experimenting with time in the picture, staying at each site for longer than the previous one. Although I was looking through a trained eye and using a curiosity of a camera, I was often surrounded by tourists and found myself observing their behaviors and comparing their practices with mine. The picture of the Great Buddha in Kamakura is a good example of this (Figure 8). Although the composition is centrally dominated with the large statue of Buddha, one’s eye drifts to the visitors standing with their backs to the statue and posing for their picture to be taken. For them, the experience of the famous site is summed up in one or two casual snapshots with friends; for this author, the experience was much more intense and rich with the act of looking.

Throughout this series of photographs, my engagement with the landscape was an external dialogue played out through the act of photographing sites of interest. At first, decisions to photograph particular sights were straightforward: having moved from Osaka, Tokyo was new to me, and I was in awe of the sights I came across. However, over time, decisions regarding which sites to photograph became more difficult: my familiarity with Tokyo grew and I saw many sites as common rather than spectacular, which resulted in significant sites not being photographed because I was too familiar with them. Similarly, an internal dialogue was taking place between me and my prior experiences. Firstly, I noticed I was photographing sites that appeared familiar but had been rendered unfamiliar within the context of Japan (e.g. a well-known brand doughnut shop where a long queue of people were waiting to buy doughnuts that are not regarded

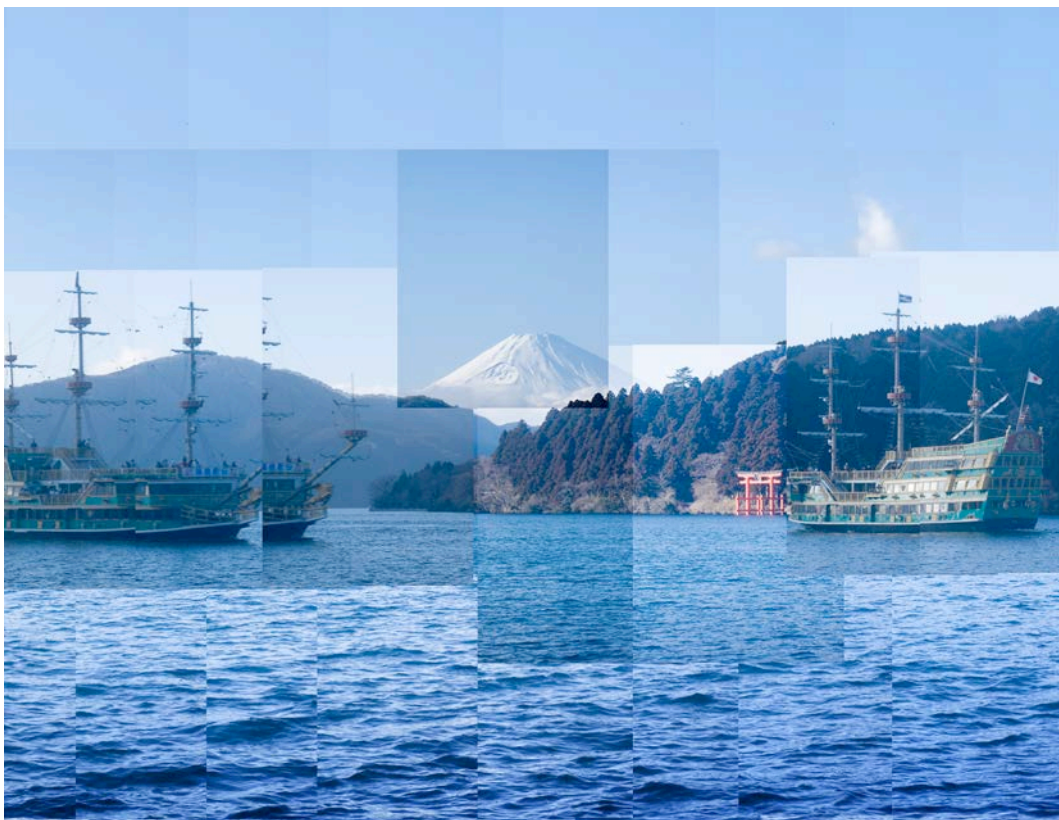
as highly elsewhere). Secondly, I noticed that I was beginning to draw upon and question visual influences in my practice: the picturesque, a notion first introduced to British culture in 1782 by William Gilpin and a tradition of landscape painting with which I was versed while growing up; the factual objective approach of the *Challenger* photographer which appeared to negate any desire for the picturesque; as well as compositional framing associated with the Düsseldorf School of Photography rendering subjects distant and dislocated from their context. The photographs were all printed on archival paper and gifted to the Natural History Museum's *Challenger* library alongside the original *Challenger* photographs (McLeod, 2008b). The rephotographic experience set an unknown course for my practice and left me examining my direction. The resulting body of work embodies both the external and internal dialogues taking place during my experience of being in Japan; the two dialogues signalling “uprootedness”, of not belonging to anywhere.



**Figure 4 shows the hybrid camera consisting of a 19<sup>th</sup> century British lens and contemporary prosumer Digital SLR body.**



**Figure 5 shows Tokyo during the Cherry Blossom season in 2008, as photographed by the author using the hybrid camera.**



**Figure 6 shows Mount Fuji across Lake Ashino in Hakone with pirate tourist boats**



in the foreground, as photographed by the author in 2008.



Figure 7 shows a vegetable field in Saitama as photographed by the author in 2007.



Figure 8 shows the Great Buddha in Kamakura as photographed by the author in 2008.

## Learning from other aliens and others (Tokyo, 2008-09)

*He [the migrant] is both a window and a mirror: natives can see the world through him, and at the same time, they see themselves, if only in a distorted view. (Flusser, 2002, p.102)*

Throughout the aforementioned projects, I was still maintaining a full-time position teaching English. The position not only gave me an opportunity to live and work in an unfamiliar environment, but it also presented the chance to meet likeminded people. The English teacher in Japan has been a common economic migrant since the 1980s when Nova Corporation founded a number of *eikaiwa* (private conversation schools) with foreign workers employed as language instructors. Such instructors continue to come to Japan for a variety of reasons. Some leave quickly; others settle. Although it is common for people to teach English in Japan, there have been few projects that have researched them in greater detail.

Continuing to look through the photographs from the *Challenger* expedition, it was notable how the expedition photographers had photographed native people. For example, two photographs of a Japanese man present him fully facing the camera as well as in profile, a visual framework that was repeated throughout the expedition (NHM, 2014). Given the colonial appearance of these images, it is easy to overlook their function as factual documents that communicate information effectively when viewed out of context. With the intention of subverting such a colonial reading, I decided to reach out to English teachers in Japan, interview them and document them in accordance with the approach of the *Challenger* photographer, albeit still using my hybrid camera. The result was a one-year project that documented the face and opinions of 96 English teachers living and working across Japan (Figure 9).

Aside from a handful of teachers being photographed in the northern island of Hokkaido, the majority of teachers were photographed in Tokyo and Osaka, with some coming from as far as Okayama to be photographed. Each interview consisted of questions about how they became a teacher, why they chose Japan, what experiences they had had during their stay, as well as questions about their ways of teaching. At periodic moments during the interview, I used the hybrid camera to document each teacher while sitting in the frontal and profile views. Despite the duration imbued in the portraits, it was common for sitters to liken the process to being pinned, as would a butterfly in a museum

collection. Such an analogy not only reinforces their constrained role as an unofficial representative of their culture, but also highlights their creativity, individuality and identity.

The 96 portraits were then displayed in three exhibitions: the first in Contemporary Art Space Osaka, a rental gallery space where photographs of teachers were projected in a random sequence onto classroom white-boards and accompanied by randomly played audio clips of the teachers' responses that had been transcribed and then voiced by Japanese students of the English language; the second was held at the Foreign Correspondents Club in Tokyo where prints were mounted, framed and hung on the walls; and the third was held at Zuishoji Art Projects, a Buddhist temple in Tokyo where the photographs were again projected onto classroom white-boards. The photographs were intriguing to the Japanese public, and the audio clips were at times shocking, on account of dispelling popular myths that have formed around the practice of English teaching in Japan (e.g. all English teachers have teaching qualifications, or native English speakers are taught English grammar in school). The project provided an opportunity for the English teachers (in the form of a reflective experience) to share their thoughts and opinions, while providing the Japanese visitors (through the exhibitions) a chance to learn of their perspective. For me, the project proposed a means of using my practice to look and reflect, realizing that I was acquiring knowledge *through* practice. Moving on with both my practice and career, the project also drew a line under my time as an English teacher.

Following the Privilege project, I began practice-led doctoral research and later ceased teaching English. Central to the research was a return to the *Challenger* expedition and its photographs from the rest of the voyage. Rather than revisit the site of each photograph in person, a Social Network Site was designed and implemented that invited volunteers from the around the world to examine the original photograph, revisit its location and upload their contemporary rephotograph and account of their experience to the website. While, it is not necessary to go into detail regarding this project, it notably affected a split in my practice: I was facilitating the visual engagements volunteers were having in response to the *Challenger* photographs, but also continuing to use the hybrid camera to engage in projects that bore no explicit relationship with the *Challenger* expedition or the research. My approach to making photographs had, for a time, been freed from any necessity to validate their making.





**Figure 9 showing a selection of portraits of English teachers from the series *Privilege* (2008-09) illustrating the formal framing borrowed from the documenting of natives during the *Challenger* expedition.**

## Home and away (Portsmouth & Ahmedabad, 2010-12)

*Habit is like a cotton blanket. It covers up all the sharp edges, and it dampens all noises. It is unaesthetic (from aisthethai = perception), because it prevents bits of information from being perceived, as edges or noises. [...] Habit makes everything nice and quiet. Every comfortable surrounding is pretty, and this prettiness is one of the sources of love of the fatherland. (Which, indeed, confuses prettiness with beauty.) (Flusser, 2002, p.105)*

In 2010, I returned to the UK. Having lived in an unfamiliar place and made creative sense of that place, I found myself unable to create. My experiences of creating work in unfamiliar surroundings had not prepared me for trying to make creative sense of surroundings I not only knew, but also wanted to leave behind. Only when I had a date

for leaving the country again, could I find the means to create a project.

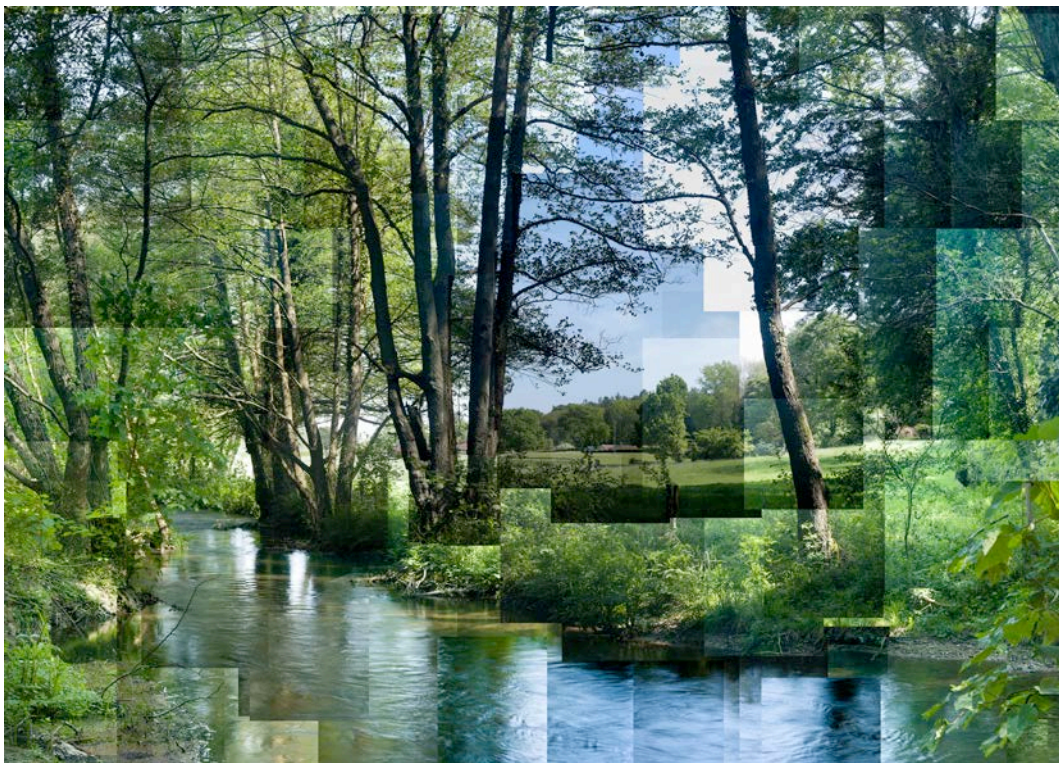
As habit can prevent the recognition of concerns, I deliberately looked to visual cues from the romantic landscape paintings of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. clouds, idyllic ruins, quaint villages), which resulted in *Home* (2011), a series of larger scale pictures with some accommodating up to 800 separate pieces (Figure 10). By choosing picturesque scenes from my home county and its environs, I sought to use the hybrid camera to cut deep into each scene and subvert the British idea of the picturesque with a Japanese sense of perfection (i.e. imperfection within perfection). The pictures were never exhibited but they represented a significant step in traversing the familiarity of home in reach of a critical eye; an experience that is best described by John Constable when remarking to his biographer, “When I sit down to make a sketch from nature, the first thing I try to do is to forget that I have ever seen a picture.” (Leslie, 1845, p.307). Key to the approach is learning to reset the external and internal dialogues in order to learn about the subject through depiction.

Upon arriving in Ahmedabad in 2011 to teach Visual Communications, habit was everywhere, covering up every piece of misery and injustice prevailing there. Recalling Flusser’s suggestion of turning one’s back on the camera in favour of information (Flusser, 2000, p80), I suspected that there was not always a need to make creative sense of one’s surroundings. In India, I felt that a photographic practice could offer little in a place where children starved on the street outside the apartment building I was living in. However, in an environment where everything appeared to be either under construction, deconstruction, or in limbo, over the course of one day, I visited a number of sites around the outskirts of the city making a series of 9 pictures titled *Away* (2012). Although seemingly unrelated, the pictures are united in the way that the subject matter influenced the recombining of the pieces gathered: a cloudless blue sky seemed unnecessary to complete (Figure 11), a housing estate encompassing both residents and unfinished homes suggested little urgency in finishing (Figure 12). Each of the images depicts a subject in an incomplete state, or takes an unusual step of being left incomplete as a picture, an approach that dragged my practice out of habit.

In returning to the UK again, I set about continuing my previous inquiry into the picturesque. However, while driving and looking for ‘good views’, I noticed that my scenery from the road was limited, always a slither of the picturesque between hedgerows. Stopping the car, I stood at the end of a hedgerow: the road from which the



scene could not be taken in on one side, an expanse of fields rolling into the distance on the other. The role of the hedgerow appeared to resemble that of a foreigner: traversing two territories without belonging to either side; planted within the ground yet also uprooted. Each of the hedges in the series *-nomy* (2012) is therefore photographed with the hybrid camera as if a portrait (Figure 13). Though not unfinished as with the previous pictures, my approach to reassembling the hedges was more open to experimentation, introducing a looser feeling of ‘congealment’ rather than reconstruction. Through this series of pictures, both my practice and the notion of the hedge were torn from a setting of habit; rendered less familiar and informative.



**Figure 10 showing a picturesque scene of Meon River in 2011 as photographed by the author with the hybrid camera.**



**Figure 11 showing an unfinished reconstruction of a construction site on the outskirts of Ahmedabad in 2012, as photographed by the author with the hybrid camera.**



**Figure 12 showing an unfinished reconstruction of mansions outside Ahmedabad in 2012, as photographed by the author with the hybrid camera.**





**Figure 13 showing a hedgerow in Hampshire in 2012, as photographed by the author with the hybrid camera.**

## Practice as a tool (Izmir, 2012-14)

*Thus, the question of freedom is not the question of coming and going, but rather of remaining a stranger. Different from others. (Flusser, 2002, p.108)*

Arriving in Turkey to teach Visual Communication Design, as with India, one could still see habit concealing the misery and injustice, but it required closer scrutiny to become more apparent. In Izmir, both students and colleagues were positive about moving away from habit and embracing the unfamiliar. Colleagues in particular were young and eager to learn. Struck by this enthusiasm for self-improvement, I sought to document the people I met rather than the landscapes seen, resulting in an ongoing series of portraits titled *Pedagogues* (2012-). In commencing this project, small changes were made to my methods: the hybrid camera was removed from the tripod, allowing the camera greater flexibility around the subject; photographs were taken *while* interviewing, thereby incorporating the hybrid camera into the conversations; and a full length mirror was placed behind the subject, which, through capturing one's own reflection, ensured that

both halves of the dialogue were visually represented in the final picture. Each interview/photograph session lasted between two and three hours while focusing on topics such as the subject's teaching background, methods, experiences and ambitions. Moreover, each of the teachers were asked to give a sample of their teaching using the mirror as a white-board for facilitating that teaching sample (Figure 14).

Over the course of conducting interview/photograph sessions with thirty teachers, further changes occurred to my methods. As the project was at first unfamiliar to the teachers, one could easily direct the sessions. However, as information about the project spread, expectations became an obstacle. Teachers would come to the sessions with a preconceived idea of the experience based upon conversations with friends. As the sessions were conducted according to the individual, it was important to find new ways to document the real person with whom I was having a dialogue and not document the pre-constructed self-image. For example, when moving the camera to record a gesture, the teacher would abort that gesture in order to maintain his or her own image of him/her. To overcome this, the camera was constantly held to my eye to lessen attention to the action-reaction. Such strategies could not have been anticipated and could only have been realised, problematized and solved through the practice of conducting the interview/photograph sessions.

The resulting portraits maintain the fragmented visual language as with earlier projects, but they are more fluid and imbue a greater sense of time than previous pictures. Through carrying out this project, I participated in approximately 60 hours of dialogue about teaching and learnt not only much about teaching in Higher Education in Turkey, but also much about each of the individuals' lives. People that were unfamiliar became familiar, and my practice, which had been familiar, again leaned toward unfamiliarity through responding to each subject. Flusser noted that making creative sense changes the exile as well as others: the experience helped me to shape my own development as a teacher, but it also shaped the development of each teacher photographed.

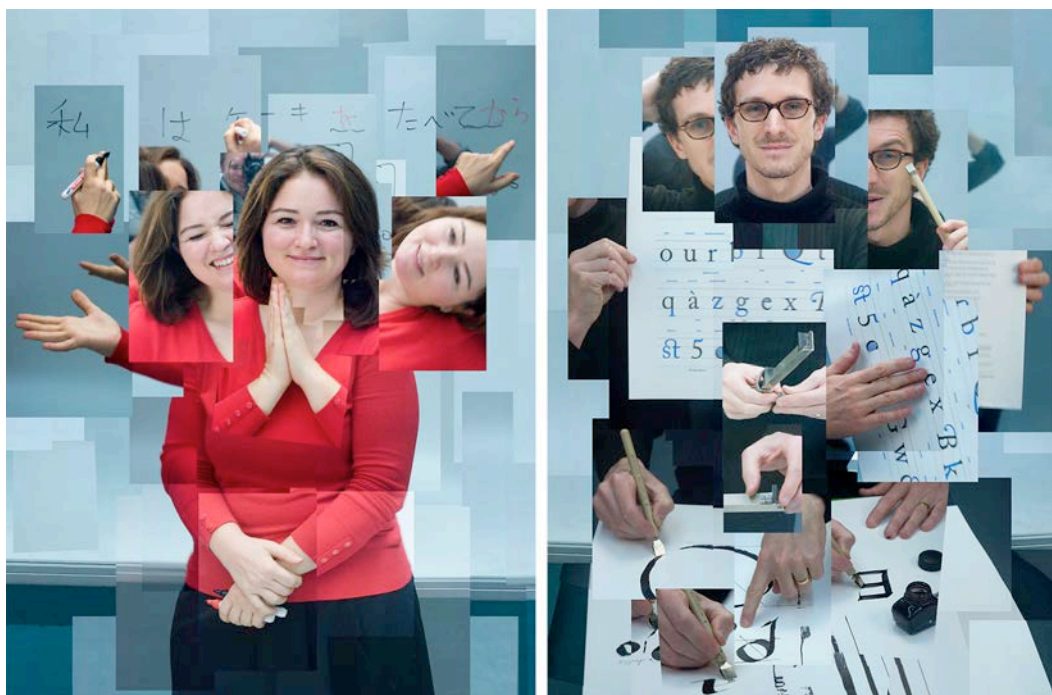


Figure 14 shows two portraits of teachers from the series *Pedagogues* (2012-): a teacher of Japanese (left) and a teacher of Visual Communication Design (right).

## Conclusion

This paper aimed to make an implicit relationship between foreignness and creativity explicit. It weaves together the writings of Vilém Flusser—drawn from his own experiences as a foreigner—with examples from the author’s photographic practice—also drawn from experiences as a foreigner—in order to call attention to the role played by the aesthetics of familiarity in practice-led research. Central to the aesthetics of familiarity is the notion of “making creative sense”. For Flusser, this was a harmonization of internal and external dialogues within the foreigner, which creates new information that transforms not only the world, but also the foreigner and the ‘other’. This dialogic process may not be mutually recognized (or agreed between the foreigner and the other) but provides a breeding ground for creative activity and “leads to the synthesis of new information.” (Flusser, 2002, p109)

Each of the projects discussed in this paper illustrates a means of learning through practice where the aesthetics of familiarity have been encountered. By employing a visual method to an unfamiliar topic, one can acquire new knowledge and methods from it (an external dialogue) although this represents only an initial level of visual inquiry. A further level is to synthesize previously familiar topics (inner dialogue) with

the knowledge and methods acquired in the initial level. As evidenced by *Pedagogues* (2012–), the two levels described are cyclical; that is, one must be prepared to continually engage with this occurrence. However, as the subject (the other), is also exposed to the aesthetics of familiarity, situations can occur where both researcher and the subject can have contrasting levels of familiarity thereby resulting in unexpected obstacles to be overcome. By preparing for or problematizing such obstacles during a project (perhaps as part of the dialogue), strategies and solutions can be devised to overcome them.

The aesthetics of familiarity play a subtle role in the operation of practice-led research. It provides a space for practitioners to further their own creative development and their contribution to knowledge, but it also creates unforeseen obstacles and even tension. Through raising attention to this occurrence, it is hoped that researchers can better navigate the murky waters of practice-led research.

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