An activity popular among the Surrealists, Exquisite Corpse is a game in which players take turns creating written or visual compositions without seeing one another’s contributions until the end. A century after Exquisite Corpse was invented, assistant professor and alumnus Benjamin Bacon, MFA ’06 (Design and Technology), worked with other faculty of the School of Art, Media and Technology (AMT) to adapt it as a tool for design education. Along with Simone Douglas, Jim Ramer, and others from AMT, Bacon accompanied 60 Parsons students to China this past summer on an ethnographic
design expedition. Their working method blended techniques developed for Exquisite Corpse: A Visual Research Collaboration 2008, a project directed by Douglas and co-directed by Ramer, with a model known as Input-Process-Output (IPO). IPO charts processes in fields such as computer science, psychology, and biology. Bacon borrowed the IPO model to describe the group’s own creative methodology. The students, from a number of Parsons’ programs, collaborated with counterparts at Tsinghua University in Beijing. Nokia loaned the students mobile phones loaded with their locative service technology, and Professor David Carroll advised students on using the technology for their projects. A dozen teams were then unleashed on Beijing and Shanghai to collect images and artifacts of global warming, youth culture, and ethnographic experiences from which to produce “outcomes”: audio recordings, performances, photography, videos, digital and analog art. Because the teams rotated roles—collecting, processing, and “outputting,” using one another’s handed-on materials—the IPO model demanded cross-cultural and multidisciplinary collaboration and improvisation. The outcomes were presented in China at the end of the month-long course and will be presented at Parsons. Bacon, Douglas, and Ramer have published a paper about the EC and IPO methodologies, which will be presented at ICERI 2009 and HICAH 2010. They are planning another collaborative course in summer 2010 at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. It is an ambitious program that guides students to explore design concepts and ethnographic experiences by deconstructing boundaries through multicultural collaboration. Bacon speaks with re:D about the summer course in China.

**SHONQUIS MORENO: What did the project have to do with design ethnography?** BENJAMIN BACON: The project involved exploring differences and similarities between both the cultures and the schools. Two Parsons students knew enough Chinese to go into mah-jongg houses and get invited into the backroom, where they spent time meeting the owners and the owners’ friends, but of course there were other ways students learned about Chinese cultural identity. That’s what I hope the students came away with: cultural insights, gained by interacting personally with local people and customs, to interpret the similarities and differences between the Chinese culture and our own. A project like Hot Pot reflected that experience in an interactive sound piece generated from recordings of evenings at the mah-jongg house. **SM: What did the IPO process look like from day to day?** BB: We formed 12 groups by spreading out the disciplines among the teams and splitting up the people who spoke Mandarin. The students had different responsibilities on different days: input, process, or output. In the morning,
we would send the input teams a text message that described their input assignment for that day and what media to use.

**SM: The text told them where to go and how to collect their input materials? BB:** Well, it was not always specific. One morning, the input directive sent by text was to make reliefs in whatever medium they wanted. On the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square uprising, the text was simple: "Your input has to be white." [In China, wearing white is associated with death and disconnection.] There was some symbolism there, but I didn't want to say anything specific about Tiananmen; I wanted them to investigate what I meant.

**SM: Can you describe the IPO process and how collaboration takes place? BB:** In accordance with the Exquisite Corpse Surrealist idea, each week the student groups move from writing to imaging to painting, change to a different medium, and pass on whatever they've created to the next group. The receiving group can incorporate the passed-on input into their own work, toss it out, or toss out what they were doing—putting it into an archive—and pick up the new idea.
All the teams pass on their work when they switch roles. After input, teams move on to a new phase: process. During process, the group inherits the media or material and can manipulate it physically, virtually, or both. During the output phase, the groups need to produce a finalized object from the process group. This final outcome can be either analog or digital. When input is created, sometimes what is passed on is not the actual artifact but rather a set of rules or journal entries—the lessons, not the product of the lessons. 

**SM: Can you give an example?**

**BB:** Sure. In the Obstructed Links project (see page 13), group members began to tie each other to trees with red rope. They were literally tying nature to humans, reconnecting humans to nature through these red ropes, which suggested that they were starting from a place of being disconnected from it. The group was then given a set of communications rules from another group as input. After layers of critiques, the group created a performance that dynamically emulated a data visualization that incorporated the tying of red rope to different people. **SM: So if the original artifacts produced by the Obstructed Links team didn’t turn into the final outcome of the project, what did?**

**BB:** The Obstructed Links outcome became a set of big digital images, as well as an analog data visualization. Team members set up 30 students and a camera, tied themselves together with red rope, and, using communication rules given to them by a previous group, did a visual performance piece, with each person representing a node or data point and the red string that tied him...
or her representing links between nodes. Based on the input, they needed to move around following specific rules. The outcome of that was a recorded performance video—something between dance and theater—that they manipulated to show the movement of the strings and, partly, the movement of the people. Then they also made a postcard, a grid of cropped images.

SM: What did the project have to do with digital and analog? 
BB: We tried to highlight each, so that if a group was doing something very digital, we tried to bring that into the analog world, and vice versa. What we hoped, and what was successful, was this cross-pollination of digital and analog. We didn’t want students to limit themselves by staying in their safe zones. They’d step out of that area and do something different:

If they were doing data visualization at first, they might end up doing performance. SM: What was the purpose of that “disorientation”? BB: The intention was to allow the students to look at what they made—art or a product—in a different way. That’s how the IPO process really works. You don’t know what packet of information or artifacts you’re going to receive, and you may end up being given a box full of found objects. So how do you take that and apply the creative tools you have to those objects? SM: What did you learn this summer? BB: The methodology. IPO teaches how an overall system—everything from a person to a plant—processes information, whether the information is energy, communication, or something else. It is not a new model, but bringing IPO into a design curriculum

Obstructed Links, a project by Group 3, was influenced by the symbolic meaning in China of the color red and the practice of binding trees with rope to represent a connection with the tree’s spirit. Group members expressed their connections to nature by using red rope to bind themselves to trees and to one another.
teaches students how to break down their concept, how to build that concept, and how that concept is finally realized. When different groups interact as parts of an overall model, each may first think it has the greatest idea but then learn that the idea can be developed into a much better, broader one. Your idea can chain-react with somebody else’s and become something brand-new that you hadn’t thought of before. \textit{SM: How important is collaboration to a good design education, then? BB: One of the most important aspects of design is collaboration. In this day and age, if you cannot work with others around the world, if you can’t set your sights on international horizons—Asia, and China specifically—then you’re missing out on a very large audience. Besides acquiring specific sets of skills, design students should learn about collaboration, particularly the multicultural aspect of collaboration. The Chinese perspective on the world—and the types of products Chinese people like—is different from a Western perspective, and understanding that will continue to be more and more important. It can’t be ignored much longer.\)

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