Visual culture, new media art 41833

Chapter 4

4. 1 The Visual Image - Logos

Symbols, colour, words, font, imagery and design have a profound effect on our understanding of any visual image we look at (Holtschue, 1997). There is, in other words, a text and a subtext to every painting, page, advert, flyer, billboard, film frame, website or televisual image. The text is what is seen consciously; the image or scene depicted, the words written down. The subtext is what is perceived, but perhaps not seen consciously, as a result of the careful use of the elements detailed above.

Malcolm Barnard (1998) states that; i?? society would not exist, and continue to exist in the ways it does were it not for visual culturei?? (p167). By visual culture, Barnard means all of the signs and codes which a culture recognises and understands, like a red light meaning stop and a green light meaning go, or a razor designed in pastel colours with a curved shape being identified as a womani?? s razor, even though there may be no difference between its blade and one designed for a man. Barnard discusses the conflicts of understanding, ownership and accessibility of signs and codes between subcultures such as hip-hop, zooties, mods, rockers, casuals, hippies or punks. These signs and codes include dress, music, language and lifestyle, but are most clearly identifiable by the visual codes they employ. A member of the punk subculture, for example, is clearly identifiable as such from only the visual clues of his or her dress, make up or hairstyle and the idea, or essence, of the punk subculture can be identified by a simple sign, such as a safety pin. As members of this visually-coded society, we are inclined to

quickly and automatically accept signs or codes, such as the i?? lifestyle symboli?? of the bird under which the various parties to the North American Fair Trade Coffee Network came together, as emblems of something more complex. This is why corporations like Coca-Cola and Starbucks are susceptible to culture jammers hijacking their own i?? lifestyle symbolsi??, or logos and the simple answer to the question of why this tactic is (relatively) suddenly so effective is that there is now commercially available graphic software like Adobei?? s Photoshop which enables activists to convincingly reproduce a close approximation of the original image, either from a saved or scanned version, or from scratch. Herland states that; i?? By integrating written, oral and audio-visual human communication, the character of the communication changes fundamentally, thereby changing our cultures with new systems of interaction, belief and codesi??. (Herland, n. d.) The integration of different communication forms is a major feature of the Internet and tends to support the theory that the signs and codes Barnard speaks of as being so important to the functioning of society are in the process of being changed in their nature by the application of digital media technologies.

4. 2 The Dubitative Image

Peter Lunenfeld, in his book Snap to Grid (2001), talks about the semiotics of dubitative images, by which he refers to the dubious truth of a photographic image. Lunenfeld quotes avant-garde film-maker and photographer Hollis Frampton, who stated that the photographer i?? fiddles around with the picture till it looks righti?? (p61). In other words, a photographic image

represents only a version of the truth, the one preferred by the photographer. Nowhere is the issue of the dubitative image more significant than in the arena of digitally produced art. Artist and digital activist, Mamta Herland points out that i?? Digital technology and Internet raise critical questions about the concepts of originality and authenticityi??. (Herland, n. d.) She notes that photography had already raised these issues, in line with Lunenfeldi?? s statement above.

Baudrillard argued that i?? contemporary cultures is increasingly determined by an array of technologically produced i?? simulcrai?? (signs which are copies of other signs) which has come to hijack reality itself. i?? (Murphy and Potts, 2003, p15) The websites of Adbusters and the Billboard Liberation Front, as well as countless other culture jammer sites demonstrate the focus placed on the dubitative visual image by culture jammers. The Adbusters web page http://adbusters. org/spoofads/index. php provides a visual clue to the significance of the dubitative image for culture jammers. This page lists a series of galleries featuring adverts which have been manipulated using, for the most part, digital media technologies to achieve the visual effect.

The book by Kalle Lasn, founder of Adbusters; i?? Culture Jam: How to Reverse Americai?? s Suicidal Consumer Binge i?? and Why We Musti?? illustrates his concentration on visual advertising images as misleading and even potentially dangerously inaccurate. Similarly, the Billboard Liberation Fronti?? s focus on subverting the visual images of billboard adverts suggests a concern over the misleading impression given by the image of the original advert, the dubitative image. The Billboard Liberation Fronti?? s

guidelines, found at http://www. billboardliberation. com/guidebook. html#Anchor-53153 provide a clear description of the importance of digital media technologies to their work.

Computers with desktop publishing software offer many advantages to the modern billboard liberator. Fonts and colors can be matched precisely, professional-looking graphical elements can be added to your text message, and scale and spacing become much easier to calculate. There are many software packages suitable for producing overlays, including PageMaker, Quark Xpress, Illustrator, Freehand, CorelDraw, and various CAD programs. Adobe Photoshop gives you the additional flexibility of being able to preview your hit - just scan in a photograph of the original board and apply your modification over it as an independent layer. (Billboard Liberation Front, n. d)

4. 3 Infinite Reproduction

Digital media technologies record information on a digital medium, whether that be digital tape, a hard drive, or a memory card. When the recorded information is manipulated, the original recording remains unchanged until the manipulations are applied to it. This means that the digital information can be reproduced as it was originally recorded from the source files with no decrease in quality (Herland, n. d.). Because the information is stored in binary form, it does not erode unless the storage device is damaged. A photograph held in a computer hard drive can be copied an infinite number of times with no damage to the original file. The term i?? infinite reproductioni?? means something else as well. It means that should an artist in one country develop an image by means of digital manipulation, not only

that image, but the instructions for manipulating the original image, can be sent around the world via the internet, allowing anyone, anywhere, to re-create the manipulations carried out by the first artist. What this means in practice is that artists like Stencil Revolution (www. stencilrevolution. com) can develop stencils based on graphics software and then make the instructions for re-creating it available on their website so that other artists anywhere in the world can create exactly the same image and so the same piece of graffiti can be found in California, New York, Glasgow, London, Madrid, Bonn, Naples, Istanbul and so on. In other words, the stencilled image, once described in technical terms, is infinitely reproducible by humans thanks to the capacity of the Internet to transmit information in visual, auditory, image and text forms. This capacity for infinite reproduction is both a useful practical tool for the digital activist and also a potentially revolutionising influence for the field of art as well as activism. i?? Digitised art and digitised copies of artworks originally created by traditional methods, can be perfectly multiplied in infinite number, manipulated and made available to others without the owners knowledge. Digital art and Internet ideology can therefore be seen as an anti-commodity, with questionable authenticity and little or no copyright protectioni??. (Herland, n. d.) Herland also points out the tendency of collectors to view art as an investment and her point above suggests that the digitalisation process may render that facility of art obsolete and thereby force a change in the economic structure of the art world.

4. 4 Critical Mass and Flash Mobs

The notion of i?? performance arti?? took a whole new turn with the arrival of the Internet into general use. Not only does the term now refer to the performance of the artist, or indeed, the performance of the user, the Internet can now take credit for enabling the orchestration of global performances of presence and identity. This takes the form not only of one-off demonstrations such as the Global Week of Action Against Starbucks or the Battle in Seattle referred to in Chapter 1, but also to smaller scale, but ongoing demonstrations.

Critical Mass and Flash Mobs are phenomena organised via websites and mobile phones but without any formal structure or organisation. Critical Mass generally takes place on the last Friday of the month and involves groups of people meeting at a certain location and cycling, en masse, through whichever city they are in following a route which may or may not be generally available beforehand. Critical Mass rallies take place in dozens of cities around the world.

They are performances of presence in which every participant may be taking part for different reasons. Generally, the view is taken that Critical Mass rallies are an objection to the amount of motorised traffic on the streets and the generally poor treatment cyclists receive at the hands of car drivers, but that is a subjective opinion only based on the statements of individuals who have created websites to celebrate the performance. There is no formal organisation to Critical Mass and therefore there is no single ideology which drives it. It is, simply, a performance of presence. (see www. cicle. org/properganda/properganda. html)

Flash Mobs are organised via websites and mobile phones and involve individuals who have provided their mobile phone numbers to an appropriate website or who have simply encountered the phenomenon through contact or word of mouth, turning up at a given location, behaving in a certain, unusual manner and leaving again (see Fig 5). Like Critical Mass, Flash Mobs have no formal organisation and what takes place is usually the responsibility of whomever called that particular Mob.

The websites which exist to record the performances of Flash Mobs are created by individuals. Since there is no formal organisation, there is no single motivation behind the performances. (see www. flashmob. co. uk/mt/2003/10/faqs. php)

A group calling itself Whirl-Mart infests the halls of commerce with site-appropriate dance:

The ritual consists of interested humans arriving at a predetermined Wal-Mart at 12 noon on the first Sunday of every month and proceeding to push empty shopping carts slowly and silently through the aisles. Eventually, all of the participants locate one another and form a single-file chain of anti-shoppers which weaves, wanders, and whirls throughout the different departments of the store for about an hour. Overall, it is a soothing and fun experience for the actors, and perhaps a memorable spectacle for shoppers. It is a collective reclamation of space that is otherwise only used for buying and selling. It is a symbolic display of the will to resist the capitalist ideology. And, it is a living, breathing, moving, evolving sculpture. (www. sniggle. net, n. d.)

Both Critical Mass and Flash Mobs are digitally-enabled phenomenon in that it would not be possible, without the use of the Internet or mobile phones, to orchestrate such large and spontaneous performances. They merit inclusion here because they represent an application of digital media technologies for the purposes of protest and activism.

4. 5 Carnivore

Carnivore in its original form was a digital wire-tapping software application used by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to monitor traffic through the servers of Internet Service Providers. It allowed its users to read email messages and eavesdrop on chat-room discussions. CarnivorePE (Personal Edition) was created by a collection of artists known as Radical Software Group (RSG). CarnivorePE i?? uses an open-source tool called a packet sniffer to listen in on the network on which it is installedi?? it invisibly detects the packets of data that make up emails sent and received, text and images posted online and Web sites browsed by individuals on the networki??. Whereas the original Carnivore was intended to spy on citizens, CarnivorePE harvests data as raw materials for artistic interfaces. One of these interfaces, called Clients, is Amalgamatosphere (2001) by Joshua Davies, Branden Hall and Shapeshifter, is a Flash interface. Brightly coloured circles represent each active network user and the colours change depending on what the user is doing. (p78). In other words, the raw information harvested by CarnivorePE is much like the basic data used to create a web page while the clients operate like cascading style sheets, each rendering a different interpretation of the data in a visual form. Carnivore uses C, Director, Flash,

Java, Objective-C, PacketX, Perl, Pd, Processing, tcpdump, Visual Basic and wincap and can be found at www. rhizome. org/carnivore.

4. 6 New Media Art

There is a long standing relationship between art and activism dating well back to the Neo-Classical period and beyond. In the last century, art movements like Dadaism and Pop Art focused on issues such as mass media, communication and consumption in order to comment on cultural and sociological concerns about dehumanisation by technology and mass consumption. The Dadaist and Pop Art movements have not only inspired contemporary artists in terms of subject matter but also in terms of style.

New Media Artists have used digital media technology to update the Pop Art technique of using screen-printing to remove all traces of the artisti?? s brushwork in order to render the images anonymous and easily reproducible while Dadaist techniques like photomontage, readymade political action and performance, irony and absurdity, designed to jar complacent audiences, (Tribe and Jana, 2006, p8) have also been adopted by New Media Artists and updated by the incorporation of digital media technologies such as graphic software packages, digital video, mobile phone technology and Internet programming codes to create a new artistic movement. i?? New Media Art often takes hybrid forms, blending arti?? s emphasis on aesthetics and creativity with the imperatives of other disciplinesi?? (Tribe and Jana, 2006). In other words, the Internet, the World Wide Web and the process of digitisation offer new environments and i?? new conditions for artistic creation, practice, distribution and perceptioni??. (Herland, n. d.)

As a successor to the Dadaist movement, New Media Art is a response to the information technology revolution and the digitisation of cultural forms (Tribe and Jana, 2006). The internet enables the appropriation of other work for incorporation in a new work and New Media Artists utilise this technique in very much the same way that musicians within the hip-hop, rap, house, dance and techno fields use samples of other tracks in their compositions. This may mean incorporating part of an image, code or words from one website in another, or it may mean using other websites in their entirety to create something new, as exemplified by Shredder 1. 0., created by Mark Napier. Shredder 1. 0 is a software application using HTML, JavaScript and Perl which allows the user to enter a web address in the interface and then have that website deconstructed, much like a printed page being shredded. Shredder 1. 0 works by i?? passing the code in which a web page is written through a Perl script i?? before handing it on to your web browser. i?? (Tribe and Jana, 2006, p 50). The result is an entirely new interface which destroys the veneer of the original website, exposing and re-working the source code which created it. Shredder 1. 0i?? s creator, Mark Napier, says that his works; i?? are not objects but interfaces. The users become collaborators in the art work, upsetting the conventions of ownership and authorityi?? the user is an integral part of the design. i?? (Tribe and Jana, 2006, p50) Mark Napieri?? s comments about his work upsetting the conventions of ownership and authority also raise issues of the democratising nature of the internet, which will be looked at in the next chapter.

Shredder 1. 0 can be seen as an example of the use of the Internet and the web site which is passed through the Shredder code as an application of

digital media technology for a purpose other than that which was originally intended. The user becomes the artist by appropriating the chosen website for use in the creation of a new piece of art. i?? The viewer is empowered as his Internet interactivity levels artistic authority. It can even be argued that the participatory mode of the Internet heralds a culture where everyone can be an i?? artisti?? i??. (Herland, n. d.) Shredder 1. 0 also illustrates the collaborative nature of New Media Art. Many artists create work which is designed to be modified by others. Douglas Davisi?? s work, i?? The Worldi?? s First Collaborative Sentencei??(1994) illustrates the opportunities for participation and collaboration which the Internet allows. Thousands of people contributed to the piece.(Herland, n. d.)

The examples described above demonstrate one of the most significant influences that digital media technology has had on the field of art. By appropriating digital media technologies into the artistic process, that process has, itself, been changed.