Digital Readymades: A Re-Presentation of Pre-Existing Media

The crux of digital art is reproducibility. Once a piece of art is made digitally, there is no telling how many viewers will see the piece. Anyone who owns a computer has access to the online museum that contains countless works of art. This phenomena is quite liberating for artists who wish to dodge the highfalutin gallery scene to establish something that has more accessibility. Due in part to this liberation, the boundaries of art online seem to be nonexistent. Especially when you consider the reproduction of old works, the appropriation of existing media and the all-around controversial nature of digital art that walks the fine line between re-presenting and blatant stealing.

Consider, for a moment, the Dada movement—specifically Hannah Hoch. The works of art that were produced by Hoch in the 1920's were merely collages of pre-existing images. The interpretation of those images—the way she cut and arranged them—is what made her art distinct. Otherwise, she would've been a plain plagiarist. Others at the time were doing much of the same—John Heartfield for example. His dissection of Hitler's image has become a main staple in Art History.

The Dadaists, and others who reinterpreted images (Warhol, Duchamp), emphasize a point made by Karl Marx in *Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas*. Marx argues that the ruling class determines the predominant ideas at the time for the rest of society. The alteration of these ideas can only be made by revolutionists who choose to overthrow the ruling class, thus becoming the new ruling class (Marx). The important thing to note about this occurrence is the way the Dadaists revolutionized new thought by implementing existing ideas and works. Clearly, Hoch and Heartfield collaged a fresh notion in society with simple tools and complex ideas.

Just like the Dadaists of 1920, digital art of today is trying to turnover the ruling ideas by presenting a unmarked perspective on the world and art. Artists like Cory Arcangel and Cary Peppermint are remixing existing media in order to transform thought. The act of creating digital art, new media art, computer art, multimedia art, interactive art or whatever else you want to call it is appropriation in itself. By making use of emerging technologies for purposes other than what it was intended for is, in essence, re-interpreting a medium. As a whole, digital art is simply resourceful as it rehashes movements of the past in an original way

through new technologies.

To emphasize this resourcefulness, one need only look as far as Cory Arcangel's work. In *Data Diaries*, Arcangel's input was incredibly minimal but the result is quite astounding. As Alexander R. Galloway exhorts concerning *Data Diaries*, "Every so often an artist makes an work of art by doing almost nothing" (Galloway). This seemingly effortless work is a trademark of Arcangel's. Other works include *Super Mario Clouds* in which Arcangel hacked a Super Mario Bros. game cartridge and erased everything but the clouds. Thus, the simplicity of his work seems to be the main attraction.

Arcangel's *Data Diaries*, like most of his work, implements data conversions. By taking a data file and tweaking it slightly, he turns a computer's memory into video art. In *Data Diaries,* the blocks of color that zoom across the screen are essentially the data of a computer. Taking this piece of art into consideration, a skeptical onlooker may claim that Arcangel only made the existing data evident. This claim is actually true but it overlooks the subtleties of the work. Under a microscope, Arcangel played a very big part in the operation. He recognized the potential for something interesting in lumps of data found on a hardrive. In that respect, the interpretation of the existing media is crucial to defining it as art.
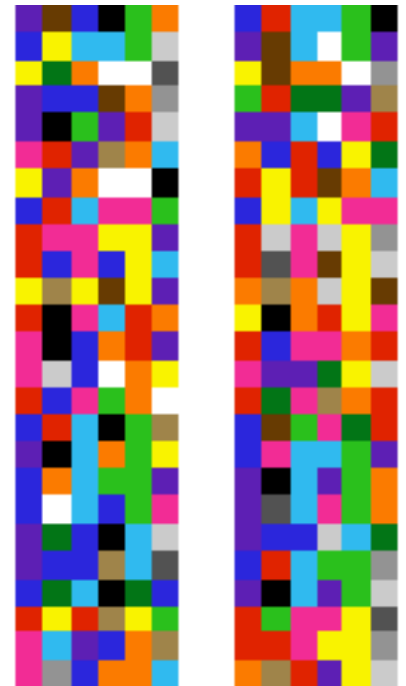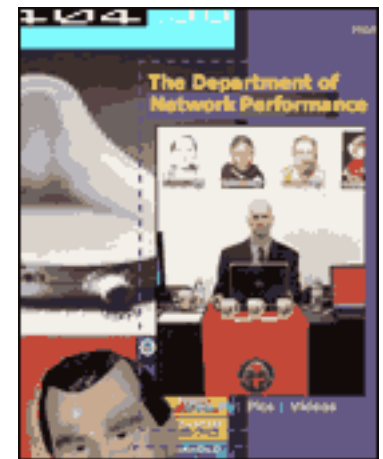
Agam Andreas offers another take on appropriating with *Web Uebermahlung Nr. 1*. This piece is a bit more analog in the sense that it focuses on reinterpreting websites by painting them. The intent in painting a website is to introduce the new technology to an older one. In effect, the new technology which is so full of hype and utility is then demystified by convention. Interestingly, the intentions of this piece are very closely related to the ideas of detournment. According to an online discussion on the topic, "Detournment could be said to be the opposite side of the coin to 'recuperation' (where radical ideas and images are made safe

and commodified), in that images produced by the spectacle are altered and subverted so that rather than supporting the status quo, their meaning is changed in order to put across a more radical or oppositionist message" (Cooley). Under this train of thought, the act of altering an image or, in this case, a website, is actually supporting a social commentary. The practice is similarly related to Culture Jamming in which "jammers" uses mass media against itself in order to communicate a socially relevant message. In doing so, the process of slapping some paint on a website results in a significantly more culture-charged piece of media.

Similarly, Cary Peppermint exists as an artist who is using myspace.com for purposes it wasn't intended for, mainly performance art, to deflate the hype behind the networking tool. Peppermint organizes her art as a "networked course and performance"—*The Department of Network Performance*—in which she encourages her "students" to develop performance art pieces. The trick is playing within the boundaries of myspace while still being overtly unsubscribed to the networking feature that the site advertises. Peppermint's work, much like that of Agam Andreas, is similar to detournment. The difference is the line she flirts between recuperation and detournement. As Mark Cooley comments, "...it can be a thin (or at least very fuzzy) line between 'recuperation' and 'detournment' at times, as Naomi Klein points out in her book No Logo. Here she details how Culture Jammers and Ad Busters have been approached (sometimes successfully) by corporations such as Nike, Pepsi or Deisel and offered lucrative contracts in return for partaking in 'ironic' promotional campaigns" (Cooley). By integrating her art into the platform of myspace, she is taking the risk of viewers interpreting it as a legitimate myspace page rather than a piece of art. In many ways, Peppermint is actually endorsing the medium she is trying to exploit. The important thing to note here, as with all the other examples, is the intent with which Peppermint is working. With *TDNP,* it's clear her motives are purely artistic and therefore should be noted as such.

Another artist aiming to integrate online content into their work is Morgan Jones with his piece *00FFFF – Pixelation Routine*. Jones' art is interested in the collage of pop art and

mass media as he uses Flash to combine images like Google Earth with voiceovers from the Iraq war. The outcome is a tantalizing display of web material that documents exactly how
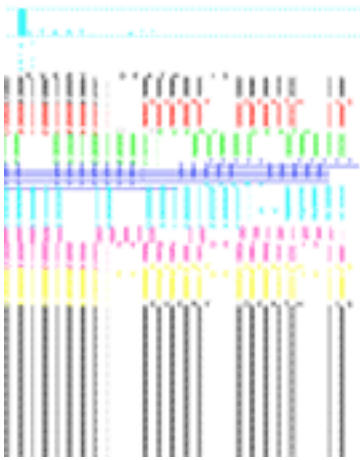

image-saturated our society really is. Artist Leon Glub comments on the occurrence,

I see the world because it comes to me through media. Through film, through newspapers, through TV...we're surfeited really. We're over exposed. We're shoved at all the time by media. And I've often said it's kind of a half joke, you know how they say you're sixty or eighty percent water? Well, actually we're made up of twenty-five thousand photographs, eleven thousand films. All of this has moved through us and is affecting us in some way or the other. So we're media creatures. We're living in an extraordinary visual world (Glub).

In this perspective, Jones' work may just be a regurgitation of the things that are being spoon fed to him each and every day. It acts as retribution for the amount of conscious thinking that has been detoured by billboards and pop-up advertisements. In short, *00FFFF – Pixelation Routine* is by no means sampling images or sound bites—it's simply allowing Jones to produce a feedback loop for his own interpretation of the state of the media.

Yoshi Sodeoka constructs another feedback loop, comparable to Jones', with his piece *ASCII BUSH*. The video recycles two State of the Union addresses made by both George W. Bush and George H. W. Bush. The only difference between the original and *ASCII BUSH* is the way it is interpreted. In the latter, ASCII characters take on the role of pixels, constructing the video in an animated sort of way. In doing so, Sodeoka hopes to turn these long speeches into something more interesting. The intention is similar to Jones as Sodeoka tries to manufacture something new out of a piece of media that has penetrated his consciousness, as well as the rest of society's.

Lastly, Chris Joseph presents a piece aptly named *Eisenstein's Monster* in which he combines the idea of Frankenstein with the montage theories of Sergei Eisenstein. The viewer

is given the opportunity to build their own monster out of clips of eyes, mouths and noses. Thus, both the ideas that Joseph mashes as well as the footage he includes in his piece are both recycled work. At any rate, the end product is quite entertaining. Not only that, but it implies the computer is endowed with omnipotence as it constructs a "biodigital lifeform". The message is clear here as it depicts technology as an all-powerful force in society. Joseph chooses to take a satirical perspective on the topic and does so with much success.

Digital art is, in fact about reproducibility as well as reinterpretation in order to establish a commentary about the times that have fallen upon us. Society is embedded with countless media messages that serve to construct our cultural literacy. Digital art acts as a byproduct of this literacy as it re-contextualizes technology and its place in our lives. Artists of the medium choose to regurgitate and shape the things that were directed at them in order to return them straight back to sender. The result is a feedback loop that includes all of society. As media and technology continue to progress, the commentaries will continue to evolve. The argument of appropriation versus plagiarism will always remain but if one looks to the content behind the supposed stealing, the justification for use of the media will be rich with intention.

Works Cited

Cooley, Mark. "Thoughts on Appropriation Versus Sampling." Rhizome. 20 Sept. 2007 <http://rhizome.org/thread.rhiz?thread=12427&page=1#24016>.

Galloway, Alexander R. "Data Diaries." Rhizome. 20 Sept. 2007 <http://rhizome.org/object.php?32948>.

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Marx, Karl. "The German Ideology. Karl Marx 1845." Marxists.Org. 20 Sept. 2007 <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm#b3>.

External Links

Yoshi Sodeoka: http://turbulence.org/spotlight/ASCII_BUSH/

Cory Arcangel: http://turbulence.org/Works/arcangel/

Agam Andreas: http://www.nictoglobe.com/new/home/subvert.html

Cary Peppermint: http://myspace.com/deptofnetworkperformance

Morgan Jones: http://www.morganrushjones.com/index3.html

Chris Joseph: http://www.babel.ca/em/