

(Im)material Pedagogies

One material teaches another.

One material mimics another, curling up against its capabilities.

One medium lurks in another's background, providing support for its softness or loudness.

One material's weight allows the other not to need any.

One material steps into the other like a tea.

One medium opposes the other's force.

One material's image is another's object.

Rowena Harris' recent work presents carefully composed constellations of materials and almost-repeated images. These constellations inhabit both physical, tangible space (in the form of sculptural elements and digital prints) and digital realms in the form of a video reel and an e-book. Welded steel lines extend from the gallery floor and walls, providing a formal and physical support structure for a disparate collection of materials and a dispersed cloud of similar images. A horizontal steel bar juts off the wall; a printed photograph of a hand curls over the edge and hangs down. A sheet of tinted Perspex, curled at the top as if to mimic the propensities of the paper, rests over top of the printed photograph. Even though the Perspex appears to be mimicking the paper, it seems to out-perform the paper at its own task: hanging over the bar. The work proceeds in increments of contagion and reinforcement between mimicking pairs of symbols/materials/mechanisms.

Repeated images (clouds, shapes, feet, hands) pop up again and again, but expressed with many different representational strategies and material supports. Continually reconfigured tropes each enact different kinds of connectivity to the various linking mechanisms between parts. The hand-image, curled over the top of a bar in a most un-hand-like fashion, repeats in a slab of plaster with a deep handprint cast into it, which is positioned as if to be pressing the bar into the wall. The feel of the represented gesture transfers into the media in which it appears. The hand's sense of pressing down becomes that of the plaster itself, which does the pressing. Yet these infusions are partial, complex. The paper hand's gesture clashes with the bend it acquires as it curls over the bar; the pressing gesture defies the plaster's gravitational pull towards the floor. A half-toned, poster-sized printout of clouds, underneath a bar placed on the floor, is repeated in another medium down the line – transferred onto the surface of a thick grey felt. These are empty sorts of images – recognizable, quotidian and placid – that easily create the feeling of sameness when repeated. But up close, the idea of their shared referent, their cloud-ness, disappears into the haze of the felt's fibres, the maze of the print's dots. Shared reference dissolves into the minute shadings of surface texture.

Harris' current work explores this play of similarity and difference with great depth and precision. Her hybrid pieces seem to bring together a community, a continuity of common images and support structures. (The steel lines perform that function quite explicitly.) But what these groups of redundant, continually mutating, and physically linked images actually produce is disjunction – a disjunction that hinges on the very signage, the very practices of conjunction.

In his widely read and freely distributed essay “The Image-Object Post-Internet” (2010), American artist Artie Vierkant describes and contextualizes his response to what he terms the post-internet condition.¹ In an era of “ubiquitous authorship, the development of attention as currency, the collapse of physical space in networked culture, and the infinite reproducibility and mutability of digital materials”², Vierkant seeks to create works that “move seamlessly from physical representation to Internet representation, either changing for each context, built with an intention of universality, or created with a deliberate irreverence for either venue of transmission”.³ Vierkant doctors the documentation of his exhibitions, photoshopping, layering and splicing the images that will both serve as the online record of his exhibitions, and disrupt the very idea that the online version of an exhibition is a mere record. In fact, the exhibitions themselves function as a raw material for the documentation just as much as the images “document” the show. Vierkant sees this path as emblematic of a meeting point between the art-historical legacies of conceptual art, which tended to pay too little attention to the material substrates of its propositions, and new media art, which focused too narrowly on the emergence of specific media, rather than the broader cultural shifts which were taking place through, between and beyond these media. Post-internet art, on the other hand, pays heed to both the material conditions of an image-object’s presentation, and the wide spectrum of available means through which that image-object might be disseminated.

But why does he insist on the *seamlessness* of the transition from image to object? Seamlessness is but one possible way to understand transition. Arguably, it is also the most ideological way to conceptualize transition; for the concept of seamlessness tends to naturalize its own object, to make the very specificity of transitions – their precarity, their difficulty, their twists – seem to disappear. With more than a century of film history behind us (not to mention collage history), we have far more complex vocabularies of transition than this. Jump cuts, montages, cross cuts, dissolves, fades. Minute shifts from weight to image-of-weight to image-as-lightness; tiny jumps from physics to semiotics. By placing equal importance on the gallery context and the broader dispersion of images through web-based platforms for image distribution, does Vierkant’s course of action merely amount to the most careerist possible formula for navigating what has become a double system of value production in the international art world: one based around the sale of physical objects, and the other (inherited largely from conceptual art⁴ but exacerbated by the web) based on the

¹ Post-internet art is a by no means uncontroversial term coined by Marisa Olson, describing work made in a milieu in which the Internet has become more of a banality than a novelty. Régine Debatty, Interview with Marisa Olson, “We Make Money Not Art,” accessed 18 October 2013, <http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2008/03/how-does-one-become-marisa.php>.

² Artie Vierkant, “The Image Object Post-Internet”, *Artlurker*, accessed 10 October 2013, <http://www.artlurker.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/image-object-postInternet.pdf>, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴ Isabelle Graw argues that art historians’ intense (even fetishistic) focus on 1970s conceptual art (as compared with, say, the dearth of historians who focus on neo-expressionist painting of the 1980s) reveals a widespread assumption that conceptual art gestures were somehow “outside” the market. Instead, she argues, it might be more accurate to think that such practices simply have a different relationship to the market. Conceptual art produced another kind of value: a discursive value which had many long-term financial payoffs in terms of teaching positions, museum shows, etc. “Conceptual Expression: On Conceptual Gestures in Allegedly Expressive Painting, Traces of Expression in Proto-

circulation of de-materialized ideas and/or images? (Within a post-Fordist context, the immaterial labours of being an artist – for instance, producing a self-sustaining, reproducible and recognizable discourse for one’s work – are paradigmatic of the broader immaterial labour economy.)

In spite of the perhaps dubious correlation between Vierkant’s prescription of seamless transition between digital and gallery spaces, on the one hand, and the look and feel of contemporary careerism, on the other, he is by no means the only one to conceive of the current moment as one characterized by a blurring of boundaries between images and objects. Michael Sanchez paints a far less laudatory view of the effects of instant image circulation on art, galleries and art practices. He argues that constantly viewing what he calls “meta-group shows” compiled by sites such as Contemporary Art Daily (and viewed on smart phones and tablets) produces a state in which both artists and galleries alter their production for the benefit of the digital imagery that supercedes the exhibition. Objects melt into images, which are in turn wrapped in other objects (iphones, tablets). This situation creates hyperactive feedback loops, in which memes spread from artist to artist, work to work, and city to city with scarcely a pause. For Sanchez, seamlessness comes at a price: this lack of lag-time is a de-subjectifying condition. For a pause in a transmission is required in order to establish a subject position for oneself, to gain some purchase on the present.⁵

As important as it may be to our time to theorize this kind of accelerated blurring between image and object, a theory of blurring must still be based on a rigorous account of the difference that is blurred. One way to do this might be to look for the modern and even pre-modern iterations of the image-object dichotomy in aesthetic thought. Foucault, in his 1971 analysis of Manet’s *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882), argues that Manet invented the “picture-object”⁶: a painting (in this case) that highlights the incompatibility of the various representational systems it sutures together, in order to draw attention to the materiality of the support. The *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, as Foucault saw it, was a composite of incompatible viewpoints and incongruities, which hollow out the painting’s representational function, drawing attention to the material supports of the image and thus pointing toward the possibility of abstraction. But even long before “objecthood” would become one of the most revered, debated and sometimes abhorred qualities of modern art, one could trace the image-object dichotomy back to the two contrasting (and often coexisting) logics of representation of divinity in the Medieval period: that of the relic and that of the icon. Even then, the two contrasting systems of referring to the sacred – one based on materiality and a relatively fixed relationship to particular spaces, and the other based

Conceptual Works, and the Significance of Artistic Procedures”, in *Art After Conceptual Art*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 119-134.

⁵ Sanchez understands this as a biopolitical shift (identified by Foucault and, later, Agamben), according to which, “Instead of institutions producing subjects, we have apparatuses capturing organisms.” “2011, Michael Sanchez On Art and Transmission” (*Artforum International* 51, no. 10 (2013): 301.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Manet and the Object of Painting*, trans. Matthew Barr (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 79.

on semblance and circulation – performed differential functions in relation to each other, produced value differently.⁷

While mixing object- and image-based strategies for producing and circulating value goes back for centuries, is it possible to say that today, in theorizing such relations, it is increasingly difficult to avoid an excessive deference to seamlessness, to blurring? Is it still possible to produce any genuine rupture – whether between images or between images and objects? Rancière, comparing the filmic collages of the early Godard to those of the late Godard, finds a remarkable erosion of their constituent images' ability to contradict one another. Whereas the early filmic collages presented a forceful clash of contraries and, in so doing, questioned “art's place and institutions within that world of conflict”⁸, by the 'eighties, these very same techniques came to “constitute one and the same kingdom of images, devoted to a single task: to give humanity back a ‘place in the world.’”⁹ The very force of juxtaposition, according to Rancière, has been eroded, as part of an “ethical turn” which he laments as an erasure of politics by deferral to a common humanity, a glossing over of the dissensus that is absolutely necessary to politics. The notion of a common humanity overlooks the inevitable exclusions that any such declaration of the common must always entail. The seamlessness described by Vierkant and Sanchez might also be understood as articulations of a contemporary condition in which a kingdom of common images absolves difference, absorbs objects.

If the world that Rancière, Vierkant and Sanchez describe (each with quite different inflections and for quite different reasons) is one in which some concept of seamless transition has become hegemonic, P.A.R.T.S. presents a careful undoing of the assumption that such transitions can, in fact, be seamless. Harris achieves this by transposing semantic effects between materials and images. In an interlude in her video reel, an image of a hand, poised as if to carry a tray or present something to an audience, moves jerkily up and down in front of a grey and white checked Photoshop background. Each time the hand repeats its “presentational” gesture and nears the centre of its frame, it reveals a bit of the text that bares its identity as a stock image. The hand gesture's semiotic reach – carrying, presenting – is repurposed to present the image as a carrier of a digital/economic value. These transpositions are extremely specific, and rely on the use of redundant imagery so that viewers can focus on their minuteness. (Perhaps in a kingdom of common images, only similarity can produce difference.) The repeated tropes in Harris' work could easily be seen as explorations of virality and contagion within networked culture.¹⁰ But for the moment, I prefer the

⁷ William Diebold sharply distinguishes western- and eastern-European medieval art by means of the former's greater emphasis on the logic of the relic and the latter's greater development of the logic of the icon. Erik Thunø's study of early medieval Rome places greater emphasis on how the logics of the relic and the image came together, working in tandem with each other; for instance, a relic may require an external sign (which could come in the form of an image) in order to be considered authentic and, thus, to be venerated. See William Diebold, *Word and Image: an Introduction to Early Medieval Art* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), and Erik Thunø, *Image and Relic: Mediating the Sacred in Early Medieval Rome* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2002).

⁸ Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009), 122.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 122-123.

¹⁰ Jussi Parikka, for instance, writes a history of contagion as a trope for network capitalism (for instance, in meme theory, Hardt and Negri's conception of capitalism as parasitic, and Burroughs'

term (im)material pedagogy, which highlights the ways in which images, imprinting themselves on material surfaces (and materials, imposing themselves on images), can “teach” each other something new, pull out some of the other’s latent potentials. Pedagogy (if it can be understood, here, in nonhuman terms), implies an active material “recipient” of an image, an active transformation of materiality by an image: not an “active” virus and a relatively passive, invaded host. Pedagogical processes always involve navigating difference, gaps and pitfalls. Harris’ works are a call to look more closely at the specific means through which transmission is achieved – and through which tropes of continuity might be broken down, pulled on, understood more minutely as negotiation.