

Quoting & APPROPRIATION WHOSE WORK IS IT?

I am a converted appropriator. I used to believe that taking images from other artists, no matter how long dead or removed from my own culture, was in some way immoral or cheating. And doing this with the computer was even more immoral, because it did not even require that I had the technical skills of drawing and painting. It was as if the computer and the dead artist conspired to eliminate me from the process of making art, leaving me as only the conduit. The fear was that somehow I could not make art 'all by myself'.

After all, those of us who are artists like to think that we are producing something unique, something which is a reflection of ourselves as individuals, something that could not be done by anyone else, and without our direct participation.

So, if we take so much pride in what we are doing, why would we ever want to use the computer as a tool for appropriating from other artists? If we use the computer to replicate someone else's work, to include someone else's images within our own work, how can we claim it as our own?

The answer lies in the fact that sooner or later we all come to the realisation that whatever our art form, none of us arrives at images all by ourselves. We are products of our cultural conventions, and once we come to understand this, most of us start looking for ways in which to expand our visual vocabularies.

Artists have always looked to other artists for this purpose, even without the computer, and even in the days when working within the conventions of one's own cultural tradition was considered adequate. Traditionally, art students would copy from the masters, hoping to understand the masters' work through the act of interacting with the source. Frequently

artists have quoted elements from other artists in their work, often simply because a particular compositional structure or motif was interesting enough to merit being worked on again. Appropriation has also been used to cross cultural barriers. Picasso took the image of an African mask into his work, and by doing so learned about a different kind of representation.

But when artists working outside of the computer quote from other sources, a certain amount of interaction with the source is assured. When Picasso placed the image of the mask in his painting *Les Femmes d'Alger*, we can be reasonably certain that he had either personally observed this mask, or at the very least had access to quality reproductions. The very fact that his hand recreated the forms of the mask confirms that he did some careful looking.

Had Picasso been working on a computer, we might not be as sure that he had looked at his sources so carefully. He could have just gone to a laser disk on African Masks, cut out one that caught his eye, and stuck it on the face of one of his figures. With a few computer commands for feathering, blending edges, and changing color contrasts, he could have made it appear to 'fit' in his painting. The computer eliminates the need for the kind of careful looking that was previously part of all quoting.

This is a profound difference. The traces of the artist's hand, even in the act of quoting, have traditionally been used to give a kind of authenticity to the new work. Now, this is gone.

So, is quoting with the computer legitimate? Now that we can use all of art history, from across culture and time, as clip art, cutting and pasting it into our work, how do we make sure that it becomes our own? Or

are we in danger of engaging in cultural colonialism, where we take without thinking?

I believe that the very quality of computers that makes it possible to appropriate so easily, is the quality which makes them the ideal tool for interacting with them as never before. Now our sources can come out of the museum showcases, out of the books, off the little postcard reproductions which used to fill our studio walls, and into the same material in which we create our images.

The computer is the great equaliser. Our imagery, what we appropriate from others, and what we draw into the computer ourselves, is all in there together. And, in some way which I still do not completely understand, this liberates us to interact with sources as never before. My suspicion is that this is because, by seeing them inside the computer, we are in some way seeing them in a state which is more 'pure' than on the museum wall. After all, we can never completely understand another era or culture in a way which allows us to approach the art of that culture with a non-biased understanding. But perhaps putting it inside the computer eliminates all of the intermediary cultural garbage which is present in any other form of presentation.

For example, in his essay on 'Third World Art as a State of Mind', Paul Kagawa (1976) talks about his own frustrating experience as an assimilated Asian-American, in viewing the art works of his ancestors in museums where they are presented as trophies in the white man's world. The setting makes the works inaccessible.

My conversion to the world of appropriation came from my experience accessing my own cultural heritage, from which, like Paul Kagawa, I was alienated. In Western culture, as non-mainstream cultural groups gain economic power, they tend to leave behind their traditions. Years ago, when I still believed that taking directly from other artists was in some way immoral, I set out to expand my sensibility. In the aftermath of the Vietnam war, I was not the only American who felt that we had become culturally arrogant. When, after some years of studying Indian and Asian art I stumbled on the tradition of Jewish art, particularly Hebrew manuscripts from Western Europe and North America, I set out to teach myself in the usual

ways. I spent hours in European libraries, carefully drawing the motifs of the texts, which I later re-drew onto canvases or into the computer. When the Bibliothèque Municipale in Marseille gave me permission to photograph (perhaps because no one had asked to see their 1260 manuscript for years), I turned to scanning my sources. Strangely, I found that everything I had believed about drawing as a means to learn about structure was ridiculous. Once my source was inside the computer, I came to understand it much more quickly. In fact, I found that I could even scan pages from books that I had never seen, and find a way into them more easily than I could with drawings from manuscripts that I had seen.

I have some thoughts about why this happens. Lucy Lippard, in her 1990 book *Mixed Blessings*, states that 'there is a difference between homage and robbery, between mutual exchange and rape' (Lippard 1990). She is speaking of taking work from other cultures, but I would expand this to include all other artists.

Because of its special quality as an instrument for storing, accessing, and creating, the computer is better suited for dialogue than for rape. When we must recreate an image from another artist or artisan in order to use it, using drawing as notation for future reference, we filter the image in terms of our own aesthetic prejudices, as well as our technical skills. These limitations are not insignificant. While it is true that artists have long copied the masters in order to improve in both of these areas, the appropriating artist still must be able to make a perfect circle in order to copy a perfect circle, and must think that it is worth the time to make a perfect circle, in order for this kind of interaction to take place.

With the computer easily able to scan images from photographs, the appropriating artist is not limited by preconceived filtering. The appropriating artist can keep returning to the original image, taking and discarding different pieces of information each time, and engaging in a different kind of filtering in each instance.

More importantly, the appropriating artist gets to learn by feeling the limits of the original image. How much can the shapes be distorted, how much can the colour be changed, how much can be eliminated, while

still maintaining the integrity of the source? This is a better dialogue with the source than just simply copying it. This is a process of getting inside the image, and pushing it around until the appropriator begins to feel the decision-making process of the original artist.

Still, appropriation with the computer is not without problems. The moral issues of taking from others, as well as the legal questions which reflect our society's attempt to deal with these concerns, change when the computer is the instrument of appropriation.

Legally, copying and appropriation may be viewed similarly, but for the artist, the issues are quite different. Copying is not interesting. The problems of exact copying may be changed in some legal sense with the introduction of computers, but the moral issues in copying are still the same. Passing something off that you took directly from someone else as your own is not a good thing, whether you do it by computer or paint brush. Of course, with the computer you can break into my office and steal a disk, take it home and have an original which is as authentic as the back-up I left at home. Obviously this is something you cannot do with the painting hanging on my wall, but morally, should you try to pass either of these off as your own work, you are engaging in similar acts of deception.

But what about the use of appropriated images that are copied not for purposes of deception or profit, but for the purpose of incorporating them into new imagery, which one then claims as his/her own? When is it fair to do this, and how do we judge whether the appropriating artist actually did more than simply cut and paste? In the case of Picasso, we could see the physical traces of his brushstrokes, but what does the computer artist have to show?

What the computer artist has to show are traces of the artist's thought. As we let go of technical virtuosity as the measure of artistic success, and look to the quality or the visual integrity of the work itself, it is important to understand that appropriation is only as effective as the art that results from it. It is silly to make a rule about how much transformation is enough, because in the context of a specific

image it may be that no transformation of an element is needed, that simply changing the context is enough to make a profoundly distinctive image, highly reflective of the appropriating artist's sensibility. Trite, banal and thoughtless imagery will always be possible, and no one should expect to guarantee against that.

This still leaves us with the legal problem. How would I, as artist, feel if my work were appropriated? As an American, this is a problem that I currently do not have to face, as we are very well protected under the copyright laws which extend to 50 years after my death. Still, while no one can copy or publish my work without my permission, I am not sure that this is always to my benefit. After all, if someone else can get my work out there in the public eye better than I can, even by changing it, I am not sure that it hurts me if I am credited.

I suggest, therefore, that we take a clue from our non-visual colleagues. I suggest simply that now, in the age of mechanical reproduction and 'easy-quoting', that we always try to cite our sources. When we publish or exhibit our work, we could note the sources with images and text. This would free us from only quoting long dead artists, or well known artists. In this way, we could use the computer to full advantage and freely engage in a dialogue with all of the visual images which are now available to use from across all of time and culture.

References

- Kagawa, Paul, 1976, 'Third World Art as a State of Mind', in *Other Sources: An American Essay* (exhibition), San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco.
- Lippard, Lucy, 1990, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in Multicultural America*, Pantheon Books, New York.

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