

VISUAL BOUNDARIES?

A DISCUSSION OF THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY IN DESIGN AND VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS

By *Andrea Wollensak*,

Moderator

Klaus Kempnaars,

New York City

Ingeborg Bloem,

Amsterdam

Gabrielle Götz,

Stuttgart

Ming Tung,

Ampang, Malaysia

Design studies and visual theory have become transformative critical practices that question boundaries and ideologies. This discussion will present issues related to visual communication, design and media as the accessible spaces in between the now established positions in media art.

PROCESS

The dialogue and image development of *Visual Boundaries?* occurred electronically throughout the month of August. The presentation is the result of that discussion. The content of the visual works address the topics discussed. For the exchange, all the participants used Macintosh systems with a common application format (Adobe Photoshop).

At the present time, no real-time interactive on-line space exists for the exchange of text and images that supports a diverse and heterogeneous set of client computing environments. Some homogenous spaces are being developed (e.g. inPerson for Silicon Graphics), but are targeted for high-end workstations, making them expensive and necessitating that all users have powerful workstations with high speed internet connections. Spaces in common use that allow for multi-user real-time interaction tend to support lowest-common-denominator (e.g. can be run on any platform including a vt100 "dummy" terminal) text-based environments, such as internet relay chat (IRC) and markup languages. Another recent development is the use of clients that allow for cross-platform image exchange (e.g. Adobe Acrobat), although this is currently oriented more towards simplifying file exchange rather than creating a real-time collaborative multimedia space for image development.

Although originally conceived as a server for interactive on-line role playing, the ramifications of a MOO (a "Multi-User Object-Oriented Dungeon/Domain" or "Mud-Object-Oriented") as a set of spaces (rooms or conferences) with interactive objects suggests a powerful metaphor for directions in which to develop the nascent technology of on-line visual collaborative space. Musical uses of a MOO environment have, for example,

isea95@er.uqam.ca T : (514) 990-0229



used instruments as objects whose musical sequences can be edited and played by any of the participants in that space. The inevitable extension of this type of interactive collaboration into the visual realm should be guided by the needs of the creative artists involved and their collective understanding of the integration and extension of the creative process into this type of environment. One important method in which artists and designers can contribute to this development is by prototyping visual models of ideal electronic environments. Such participation will serve to provide useful models for software engineers and also to stimulate new ways of thinking about multi-user interactive spaces for artistic collaboration.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants include: Klaus Kempnaars in New York City, Ingeborg Bloem in Amsterdam, Gabrielle Götz in Stuttgart, Ming Tung in Ampang, Malaysia. All of the participants are practicing graphic designers primarily working in print media, and now exploring multimedia and electronic forms of designed information.

The intention of this discussion was to address issues affecting the concept and practice of design within an electronic collaborative space. The participants, in light of their diverse geographic contexts, examined the conditions imposed by their relation to technology in terms of their own approaches to visual communications. Each participant was posed the same set of questions:

- within an environment largely determined by technology, what is meant by regionality and universality of place?
- are individual identities effected in electronic constructions?
- does technology negate regionalism?

From the above questions the participants issues evolved into the following topics:

<i>borders and colonizations</i>	(Malaysia)
<i>design and global issues</i>	(Amsterdam)
<i>frontier/frontline/surveillance</i>	(Stuttgart)
<i>respecting local spirits, maintaining distinctions to identities</i>	(NewYork City)

Borders, boundaries and colonizations

KLAUS: Visual boundaries? Do we mean boundaries of western colonization? Are we talking about a new form of western colonization? Do we really all contribute to blur identified boundaries or is most of the influence resulting from an overwhelming dominance of western ideas?

MING: Graphic design is a western commodity. It is only of use if the society strives to be more like the west. Klaus talks of a new form of western colonization, I agree.

The infiltration of Dutch and British design is here (Malaysia). The newest look and typefaces are all here. The Malaysian designers and students look to the west, and not inwards.

KLAUS: Our responsibility is to listen and understand different views and to interact upon that foundation. Input from different cultures is imminent to really understanding a global vision.

I do not believe that blurred identities become a normative condition. We might want to think or make multi-cultural images, but in the end they just represent a momentum, yet collapses in the ghetto of real life, where status, sexuality, mixed races are building new barriers with the same meaning and cause. As soon as we try to overlap or blur identities, we will build replacements.

Let's face it, their never will exist a blurred cultural community, because our instinct is based on distinctions to identify. As human beings we are trapped in judging identities and when we are talking about identities we automatically mean boundaries. We are constantly overthrowing common identities, with the result to keep the same old structure.

MING: The 'blur' that you are talking about is also about 'pre-segregation'. For example, Malaysia - the Land of three dominant races and cultures. A small elite educated and influenced by overseas (UK, USA, Australia, etc.). The infiltration of international companies on a relatively naive market. American t.v. show and tastes penetrating in. A young country questioning what it is, and recognizing the huge influence of the West on its young.

We were surprised at the relative ease our work is accepted here and in Singapore. Are there any cultural boundaries or limitations- or, are our observers pre-segregated? Is this not an indication of this 'blur' that you can take work from one continent to another and find work? Or, of western colonization?

Perhaps we cannot segregate by race and culture, but by attitude.

GABRIELLE: I have also existed in an area defined by blurred boundaries. Growing up looking at the 'wall' in Berlin and every Sunday enjoying homemade cake in Grandma's (eastern) kitchen. As a child I was conscious of the 'other' side, I was educated to differentiate, to segregate. When this boundary/barrier fell, the absurdity of the condition was confirmed.

Now the east is fully equipped with technology, and in an electronic environment the boundaries become defined by attitude and status - ie. who can afford the equipment?

MING: I think the concept of boundaries, or more specific visual boundaries (meaning graphic design, visual communi-

cation) is, in the first place, related to one's status. If one has lots of money it is possible to take an airplane (or buy it) and fly to a deserted tropical island in Malaysia, or anywhere one desires to go. One is able to experience the (visual) differences of many cultures. Technology is available to the privileged, and boundaries are digitally blurred. The incorporation of the computer in design has been a great factor in a universal look.

There is a clear economic/power division dominated by western (colonized) influence. The division between the computer literate and illiterate.

'Culture' is status? In Malaysia, culture and heritage is considered 'old, old fashioned or 'not modern', 'not new' (A second-hand market is virtually non-existent).

The direction of visual influence seems to clearly come from the west to the east. Does the west learn from the east as well?

Design and global issues

KLAUS: Next to the written word, imagery will carry the communication, representing the local site for a global interested public. There is no doubt in location, as every attempt to blur will weaken the position and the message eventually only serve as self esteem of the producer without communication value.

INGEBORG: It's crazy that we think of the world as a global village and think of blurring borders while there have never been more borders than in the last few years. I am thinking of the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Neighbors [?] fighting with each other without really understanding the other.

One may think that the internet reduces the distance between people but it doesn't make a difference when I'm going to the pub next door and only talk to certain people or when I browse through the internet newsgroups. The only advantage is that you don't judge people by the way they look. People with the same interest find each other but besides of that?

(What really fascinates me about our profession is that we can browse through different view points and visions of cultures and intentions. At this moment I work simultaneously on a variety of diverse projects that all have different audiences from the Dutch police, a multinational clothing manufacturer for children, and electronic publishing houses. These clients have different representations and publics. I become an actor, entering and exiting realms other than my own.

Frontier/frontline/ surveillance

GABRIELLE: I think the characteristics of identification and identity in technology are often altered by desire and fascination. The individual is often de-centered, while desire is fixated on power.

INGEBORG: The control of the individual by 'power' is evident. for example, surveillance systems introduced by digital technology : recorded message systems and the collection of data.

KLAUS: What you are saying implies that our dominant tools (technology) are ultimately controlling our messages (?).

MING: Well, technology does control our final form and (somewhat) the content of our work... technology changes our processes of working, it also separates those who have knowledge/power and those who do not.

For an individual without those resources (in Malaysia), boundaries are defined by the kampong and the edges of the jungle.

Respecting local spirits

Distinction to identity

INGEBORG: It will be necessary to position technology not just as a tool but as a cultural form that can be manipulated as it is needed.

KLAUS: I am not interested in the idea of 'culture' to change into a MTVisation, I rather observe existing ideologies and create in exchange with local expertise a custom tailored solution. More often I see visions with cross-cultural background and they certainly tell their story, but at the same time it makes me wonder if we really are trying to understand each other?

INGEBORG: I agree with Klaus, there seems to be less listening and more talking in image-making today. I think we are also terrorized by a few multi-nationals which have more power than the politicians. The voice of the individual/citizen is quiet if not silent. We hear and see elemental soundbites, reduced to media extravaganzas. The individual is loosing its voice in electronic space.

KLAUS: As we are heading for the next millennium the biggest task will be to understand our cultural boundaries and to create from there an energy. Today our increasing awareness of the smallness of our planet and the fragility of life upon it, commends to us a sensitivity to the cultural identities and achievements of all people. Creating for a global public calls on respecting local spirits. Unity in diversity.