

Post Appropriation

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Sean Snyder, *Analepsis* (still)

In artist Sean Snyder's *Analepsis* (2003-04), a sequence of video snippets present alternating sweeping and zooming shots of various landscapes and settings. The work is made up of establishing shots taken from satellite news broadcasts (each lasting 1-4 seconds), yet devoid of sound, text, explanation. Rather, the spaces are de-territorialized and impenetrable. Shipping containers, compounds, apartment blocks, scrub and brush, cranes, an airport runway, guard towers, oil fields, mountain ranges, office grids; these views are offered impartially, as if in a film which seems to lead nowhere in particular (the widescreen format references both cinema and the obscuring of the rolling news feeds). This could be anywhere, or everywhere. As in his other works, which have utilized images acquired from news agencies such as Associated Press and Reuters, Snyder takes on the position of the critical observer, cataloguing and representing extant imagery and information as his own. However, this gesture, while clearly in the tradition of the Duchampian readymade and the appropriation art of Sherrie Levine or Louise Lawler, differs in the absence of acknowledgment. The work is neither antagonist nor ironic; Snyder's practice claims this material as his own, and, in doing so, not only questions notions of authorship but of factual truth itself. As Daniel Birnbaum has written:

“Entering what might seem to be a hermeneutical labyrinth as puzzling as the hieroglyphs were before the deciphering of the Rosetta Stone, we question whether we should take what the artist has excavated as factual or ask further questions. Or should we question the source from which the references are extracted? Do we even want to look for the source of the reference, or could we even find it?”¹

The artist, whether appropriating tele-visual or online media (a distinction gradually disappearing in the expansion of interactive technology and niche programming), acts as a cypher, a selector of anonymous and interchangeable items. There is no attempt at authenticating the material or its source. The quantity of information available is significant here; for every point, there is a counterpoint; for every apparent statement of fact, there are a number of variations, contradictions, possibilities, refutations. The news report, once assumed to be singular and incontrovertible, gives way to particular positions, to different takes. The factual has been made aesthetic. Snyder's digital prints of photographs taken by soldiers in Iraq (*Untitled [Iraq]*, 2003-05) — of shots from behind rifle turrets, of Saddam Hussein's hideout, of improvised explosives — refine this approach. The implications of the death of the author, and of authority, transcend the theoretical, textual play of art criticism. They end up 'embedded' in moral ambiguity and indecisiveness, in the snapshot which aspires to neither pacifism nor propaganda. Rather, these images retain a critical distance and detachment, through layers of camera lenses and mediated representations. And yet, the passivity of the relative position, the refusal to take sides, betrays a very specific strategy of power and hierarchy.

There is a rough analogy to be made between the contemporary discursive field, essentially the postmodern complex itself, and the internet, as a technological

network of disparate, yet equivalent, sites. Both are anti-hierarchical, or presume to be, and non-linear, although, again, the freedom of the viewer is measured by a pre-determined sequence of hyperlinks, of limited options (they are both systems, after all, and must follow the logic of that system, whether a theoretical construction or a set of algorithms). The subject is guided through their own course, charging at breakneck speed through different channels and conduits, sudden intrusions, familiar points (an e-mail account or a bookmark, for example), reversals, updates, screens within screens, yet always leaving other sites untouched. It is not so much infinite as impossible. The sheer volume of data and

of information. And yet, the actual lack of equivalence of these articles is shown up in the headline, and the emphasis on Palestinian acts of violence over Israeli oppression. The capacity for manipulation remains; in the leveling of values, the reprehensible is justified as merely another point of view.

A letter to the artist Bjarne Melgaard reads: “The pictures you have provided me with past weekend keep on reappearing before my mind’s eye. It has hardly anything to do with their unusual; one might say provocative character but everything with the fact that their source remains unknown to me. Without their context of origin these photos — I guess you got most of them from obscure sources you will not reveal or through the internet — remain an enigma [...] In the end the observer will not even be able to find out if this is documentation of suicides, the pictures might as well be visual proofs of murder scenes. This ambiguity haunts me.”²

The lack of explanation, of authentication, renders images problematic. The strategy of appropriation is, therefore, also a reflection of artistic uncertainty. Does the artist even know whether such images are real or fake, documentation or fiction, reportage or propaganda? For the post-appropriationist³ the image, allegedly free of any defining rationale, is there to be contextualized, to be adapted to serve some purpose (even if this purpose is an idealistic aporia of interchangeable, free-floating signifiers). The artist merely uses what already exists, what is there on-screen, ready to be downloaded and detached, re-used, re-made, re-configured. In doing so, new meanings may be assigned, but never with the assurance of truth. Rather, meaning is malleable, perhaps existent, yet unable to be proven, and it is this condition, this facility of the image to be used to any and all intentions, that represents the almost discernible, barely perceived fragment of truth.

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Rainer Ganahl, Fox News:
Homicide Bomber Kills Four in Gaza 1/11/04

imagery, and their relentless propagation, is a continual reminder of the unverifiable nature of content, the uncertainty of origin, and the equivalence of value. Rainer Ganahl's *News Paintings* (2003-04) follow a similar trajectory, in which the artist searches internet news sources, prints them and contracts the painting out to assistants (mostly found online as well). These 'freeze-frames' of what are effectively fluid sites draw attention to the formal organization and properties of the news page, and the manipulation of its reading through these devices. The changing image is slowed down, stopped, and fixed in paint (a medium loaded with connotations of timelessness). In the work *Fox News: Homicide Bomber-Mom Kills Four in Gaza, 1/11/04*, the transitory nature of the online report, soon to be displaced by celebrity gossip and domestic politics, refuses to disappear in the ongoing proliferation

- 1 Birnbaum, Daniel. 2005. *Sean Snyder*. Köln: Walther König, p. 4.
- 2 Demeester, Ann. 2002. "No Answers." In *Bjarne Melgaard: Black Low*. Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, p. 24. Melgaard's choice of material, typically drawn from Black Metal and S&M subcultures (themselves firmly located in online sites and networks), plays on the notion of authenticity. In appropriating the codes and paraphernalia of youth and outsider culture, the artist reiterates the ambiguity of these interests: are they juvenile phases or warning signs?
- 3 A previous usage of this term appears in John C. Welchman's *Art After Appropriation: Essays on Art in the 1990s*. However, considering the topic, I would hope Welchman tolerates my own 'appropriation' here.