iText 3: Ceci n'est pas une video

iTexts 1 to 6 are a compilation of related text accompanying the exhibition iPod Killed the Videostar

The advent of the pop video as a serious televisual force saw a mass movement of bedroom culture into the public domain, especially once satellite broadcast and cable television expanded the paths of supply and demand. Iconic imagery of bands and pop stars that had once marked the private territory of millions of teenage bedrooms now loomed above bars in airports, hovered above shopping mall concourses and unfolded against different soundtracks in nightclubs around the world.

Within a relatively brief period, imagery that had once been confined to private spaces, specialist publications and expensive advertising campaigns, became as much part of the mass cultural wallpaper as images of sporting personalities, politicians or traditional cultural iconography. In what some have called the first true case of "collusive Globalism", audiences who were already sceptical of corporate advertising practice and the legacy of Orwellian visions of thought control, readily embraced the new phenomenon of the 1980's. Millions cheered that Madonna could attain equal visual status with nuclear disarmament campaigns or that unknown underground club personalities, if they played their cards right and schmoozed the right people in the right place at the right time, could have their moment in the cathode limelight.

Not surprising, then, that subsequent generations of visual artists have paid close attention to bedroom culture and the iconography of popular music; the womb and continuum of a shift in visual cultures. Before video, relegated to the sidelines; after video, such a dominant cultural force that, no wonder, it has been rapidly adopted and exploited by corporate machinations.

Artists currently working with these concepts focus their attention on a diversity of nodes. Some examine -in a reasonably emotive way- their immersion and involvement in the hidden philosophies and drives within pop and music cultures. Others take a more documentary approach, standing back and examining the place that pop music has come to hold in how we see and describe ourselves. Yet others still have addressed the formal structures of the iconography, rebelling against its predominant modes of production and, instead, make art works that reference these cultures using more traditional crafts and processes. Perhaps, in some cases, individual artists can straddle all of these notions in a single body of work.

The works of Kevin Francis Gray, Maike Abetz & Oliver Drescher, David Hancock, and Luuk Bode bear no immediate close resemblances. Indeed, none of these artists share individual concerns, approaches, or a dominant media. Yet, there is a way in which the preoccupation with pop music cultures -and the choice to make works using far more traditional techniques and media- is part of an approach by numerous contemporary artists to engage with popular music cultures in the post-video context.

Arguably many artists working with these concerns share a strong lineage to Pop Art. Certainly, the referencing of techniques, objects or even apparent thinking that relates strongly to Pop Art might be visible at a superficial glance. However, there is something intrinsically different about producing such works in a contemporary context compared with Pop Art works emerging in the 1960's.

For a start, orthodoxy holds that Pop Art was a rebellion against the stranglehold of "high culture" and its recommendation of movements such as Abstract Expressionism as a valid contemporaneous artistic expression. The works of artists working in a current contemporary context -such as those named- exist almost in an inverted world; a culture in which the mass popular culture and its expression are no longer looked down upon but are dominant in many ways. They produce their work at a time in which the lineage of Pop Art is not its success in tackling the "high art" world, but it's unforeseen success in additionally being able to assail the mass culture. For example, many people who are "not interested in art", readily voice their approval for a visual culture that draws directly on Pop Art in everything from greeting card and television title design to furnishings and textiles.

The success of Pop Art as a movement has not only contributed to specific visual

cultures. Furthermore, in the more specialist arena of the art world (and perhaps more relevant therefore to many choosing to produce 'fine art' in a contemporary context) it has contributed to the weight given to certain media by the orthodoxies of contemporary practice.

Warhol's and Jack Smith's experiments with film are as much part of the canon of film-as-art as the works of those pioneers coming from a position of traditional filmmaking techniques to produce film art. In effect, they have ironically contributed to the current state-of-the-art scenario in which the tyranny of 16mm film and digital video as art objects reigns strongly in museums and other traditional bastions of visual "high culture".

The decision of contemporary artists to make work directly engaging with popular cultures (such as pop music cultures) using more traditional visual arts practice can be read in a number of different ways. However, one way that is important to consider is not the immediately apparent macrocosm; the lineage from Pop Art and its rebellion against dominant cultural values. Instead, it is the microcosm, the dominant values and attitudes of the specialist visual arts world.

Video, photography, film, installation, performance and almost any other practice that does not smack of traditional visual art (such as painting and object sculptures) have been prevalent in the canon of high-end international visual arts for almost the three decades; ever since such practices were first embraced and assimilated into the philosophies and orthodoxies of contemporary art. Pop Art played a significant role in championing the acceptance of these "low" materials and industrial production methods. However there is a certain irony that, away from the pockets of 'Popism', these very techniques were rapidly reclaimed by artists working from much more academic and intellectual positions.

If Pop played a role in putting film, video and photography into museum collections, then those same materials and processes were just as readily assimilated by artists producing anti-aesthetic, anti-pleasure conceptual works. This trend is very clearly visible within the art world through much of the 1970's. And, up until recently, certainly in northern Europe, one could easily see how the orthodoxies established in the 1970's have informed what works have made it into high-end galleries and institutional collections.

In one sense then, contemporary artists choosing to make easily accessible works, such as figurative works dealing with popular visual cultures could be viewed as acting in rebellion. Or at the very least, ignoring the orthodoxies that are likely to see their work lauded by influential galleries, institutions and publications.

If one reads this choice as rebellion, then perhaps they are rebelling not against a reactionary greater culture, but against the narrow confines of the orthodoxies of the specialist art world with its residual preferences for intellectual, austere conceptual practices. The end of the decade in which Britart gained increased visibility coincides with a broader revival of rediscovering the ideas and practices of a more traditional art including painting and object sculptures. This time though, these practices have been very clearly integrated along with other dominant practices by many of the artists who rose to prominence during that era.

The return to "the beauty of the object" that we have been promised for the next Documenta, the re-emergence of painting as a "hot" contemporary practice as showcased by high-end international commercial galleries and the (apparent) simplicity of gesture in many works receiving recognition and attention in recent years are current. Painting is the new black. Drawing is the plat du jour.

These are not directions that can yet be easily qualified and explained with hindsight. But, one thing is clear. With or without recognition, a number of contemporary artists have chosen to start (or continue) making works in which the aesthetic quality and traditional craft methods are at the fore. If there is irony, analysis and deconstruction present, it is only allowed to exist in a way that does not usurp the immediate visual impact of the work. These works use the age-old sense of a manipulated viewer experience rather than the slow burn of hard intellectual engagement.

For example, the work of Maike Abetz and Oliver Drescher primarily consists of large-scale canvases populated by figures, objects and decorative elements. The careful selection, composition and rendering of these give the works an immediate impact that, we are told, paintings should have. Colour, form and technique all contribute to ensure that we experience a pleasing, sensual experience long before we begin to note the distinctly retro tone present in many of the works, not in the style of the work itself, but in its content.

Figures and objects allude more to something from a Beatles album cover than contemporary predominant aesthetics. Objects - record players, pod televisions and scooters- all seem to have been selected for their strong retro associations, perhaps a subcultural identity that we are supposed to understand is important to the artists. We are drawn into a world of iconography straight off a teenager's bedroom wall circa 1969 (or at least the understanding we have of one from film representations and illustrators' offerings). There is something odd about this experience from the point of recognition. Without any immediate reference to the world of the generic contemporary city or overt current political overtones, how are we supposed to understand this work? Is it a form of self-portraiture? Do Maike and Oliver want to tell us something about their passions and obsessions? Do they want to tell us about their private world, played out in Berlin, the European city in which it is allegedly most possible to immerse oneself completely within one subculture and let go of the mainstream completely? And, indeed, do we really need to be concerned about any of this to appreciate the immediacy of the work, to enjoy the paintings directly as beautiful objects?

In a certain way, this density of meaning, this very personal use of objects with broader retro culture associations and, probably, much stronger personal associations, is oddly familiar. There is a sense in which the work shares much of its practice with preceding European movements or, perhaps more accurately, artists' subcultures. In its use of decoration and referencing historic iconography and especially in its drive to present an immediate and sensual experience, to move the viewer, their work seems strongly related to the work arising from movements such as Pre-Raphaelitism. Not because it bears any stated intent to do so and not because of any obvious stylistic similarities, but certainly in terms of work's relationship to the viewer, there are shared features.

The Pre-Raphaelites used decorative elements and imagery loaded with meaning for the cognoscenti, for those who shared their ideas, passions and interests; a bonus meaning for the informed not available to the broader audience. So too does this work exist in a world in which, short of communicating directly with Maike and Olivier, we take away a sense of another, non-mainstream, mindset and experience it through its sensual and aesthetic qualities. Only if we were part of their set might we get some of the intentions.

In a way the Pre-Raphaelites were the first teenagers (albeit it very privileged and socially influential teenagers) who strove to make a bedroom culture that differentiated them from the "grown ups" around them. They met in places decorated and demarcated with images and objects carrying occult meaning to those who shared their vision. Their process was similar to strategies adopted by millions of teenagers to build and defend a visual culture of their own across the privileged developed world in more recent decades. In their art, various Pre-Raphaelites exhibit a number of the characteristics later forming the backbone of teenage bedroom cultures: you must see it in order to know that we exist, but you must only have access to enough understanding to know that you do no belong to it.

So too does the work of Abetz /Drescher provide access to a private world to which we do not belong. We are invited to enjoy their skill and sensual pleasures in a personal culture, but it remains too specific and not generic enough for us to feel that we are part of it. As with so many teenage visual cultures, it achieves perfectly one of its apparent aims: to let us know that they are cool and that we should really want to hang out with them, but leaving uncertainty as to how we could be welcomed into their private, cool world.

By contrast, the locus of Luuk Bode's works on canvas appear to have far more of a direct lineage to the Pop Art concern with the form

of popular imagery. Just as Liechtenstein's paintings paid detailed attention to the form and elements of mass reproduced comic books, so too does Luuk Bode's work casts its view on how the forms that make up the language of comic books, the graphic novel and album cover art are constructed. Perhaps, more importantly, it is concerned with how they can be reworked and manipulated by the artist to achieve new results.

However, the process, again, exists within the microcosm within which these contemporary artists practice rather than the macrocosm of Pop Art's overriding agenda to revise the position of popular visual cultures in the broader cultural context. Luuk Bode's works do not exist in a world in which we need to be prompted to think about the skill and processes that we take for granted in the cartoon strips of daily newspapers. Instead it arises, at a time in which the drives of Pop Art have resulted in vast proud industries of comic and graphic novel producers and swathes of hidden consumers; comic book fans who will willingly part with money to appreciate the obscure productions of artists whose names are rarely known by mainstream visual arts institutions. It exists at a time when the generations who grew up economically able to shop for records can remember the all too familiar motifs deployed to indicate specific genres, heavy metal being a specific case in point. And it exists at a time when, more recently, these forms and motifs have been re-interpreted through the mass culture of the pop video and music channels and fed back to vast audiences. For example, through the popular re-emergence of animation as a hip tool for pop video makers or of MTV link segments.

Luuk Bode's work is unusual in that not only can it be understood -along with other artists mentioned- as existing against the orthodoxy of contemporary conceptual art aesthetics, but also against the predominant thinking and orthodoxies of the underground comic and graphic illustration scenes. He is not offering us a comic. Instead we are offered paintings. In a sense, the work exists as a challenge to two microcosmic worlds' demarcation of their respective territories. The works are at once littered with immediately recognisable imagery from the comic and pop culture worlds, but always with a twist. Form does not conform to what we expect from a comic; the use of paint does not conform to what we expect from a painting, its flat, graphic quality defying a "painterly" approach.

In a similar vein, the work of the London-based Irish artist Kevin Francis Gray takes its imagery from pop and street cultures and reconsiders it. Certainly the media -plastics and apparently industrially produced materials- references both the throw-away nature of the cultures to which he turns his gaze, and, indeed, the Pop tradition. Furthermore through the stark use of colour, the effect is not dissimilar to what has already been explored in Katarina Fritsch's work, a focus on familiar forms a solid objects taking up space. But, instead of purely rejoicing in pop culture in a "naturalistic" or hyperrealistic form, his sculptures seem to find a line of communication with classicism. A bright red girl band in smaller-than-life scale bursts forth with the same frozen energy as the revelry of a group of Pans or Bacchanaliae captured in stone or marble within the decorative pediment of some palace or a garden fountain. A grubby street scene -perhaps a mugging or gang violence- is converted into a pieta; grubby youths in hooded sportswear becoming something much more monumental.

Whereas Kevin Francis Gray's work involves denying "realism" through colour and scale, a large body of work by the Manchester-based artist David Hancock involves presenting an extremely precise, hyperrealist depiction of bedroom culture. Quite literally, he has painted numerous works of individuals, often apparently identifying with grungy or Goth subcultures, in repose in their private spaces: the bedrooms. The walls covered in posters that declare an identity, the small details of a personal and yet instantly recognisable lifestyle rendered precisely in paint.

More recent works have seen him moving more in the direction of literary sources, strongly fore grounding his personal interest in the Goth music and subcultural scene and its historic sources of inspiration and interest. We see it not only in the use of the Gothic literary sources as a starting point, but again in the details of clothing and hairstyles immediately associated very specifically with certain music and popular cultures. Within the context of the society in which they are produced, they take on an even greater resonance. The historic social problems and

economic depression of Britain's 19th century cities of industry in the late 20th century is strongly entwined with the subcultures arising within them. At one end of the spectrum the timeless Beatles narrative tells of how music can represent an economic and personal hope for those with ambition and talent. The alternative narrative is one of embracing music and "opt out" cultures with a ferocity that denies the lack of choice.

If Beatlemania, Liverpool's enduring narrative is fundamentally a "feel good" story, then Manchester is rich in narratives that prove that feeling bad can be a form of hedonism. And if the former is one of the reasons that partly explains the accessibility of an enduring Beatles nostalgia in cultures such as the mainstream culture of the USA, then the latter is perhaps part of the reason that Manchester holds such a specific place in the British imagination.

The Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk once described the period in which she lived and worked in London as being an experience of being surrounded by "cultivated misery". One wonders what she might have made of Manchester by comparison.

The local -and indeed national- culture celebrates Manchester's icons with a fierce pride. Icons such as Morrissey whose own summary of his hometown was, "Manchester, so much to answer for". Or there is Shaun Ryder and Mark E Smith's flagrantly fucked-up kind of fame. Or Bez's drug-fucked "freaky dancing". Or the Hacienda's burning riches to rags story and its relative, the tale of Ian Curtis

All say something about the endurance of Manchester's "feel bad" narratives. Feel bad fiercely enough and it becomes a transcendental thing. Manchester takes the psychology of Jean Genet and makes it a popular pursuit. Despite the big smiles of the orange-tanned queens in the "gay village" and the allegedly glamorous lives of the Beckhams in recent years, Manchester remains a place in which feeling bad achieves the status of a form of resistance rather than compliance with national cultural dictats.

David Hancock's work appears acutely aware of this whilst never advocating or reinforcing the cultural mechanisms at work affecting the characters he represents on his canvases.

There is a cold, dispassionate quality to the gaze; understanding and acceptance certainly, but definitely something short of advocacy. Furthermore, he is an "outsider artist". Not in the way of a set of naive and primitive aesthetics easily-embraced by the commercial art world as a nice little earner. On the contrary, he paints with controlled skill and a talent unwanted in "outsiders" by those who hope to profit. But he is most certainly an outsider in the context of production. Working away from the commercial art centre of the UK and the various scenes associated with it, his work has evolved largely unaffected by trends and fashionable ideas in contemporary art. Directness and a lack of conceit or games of double bluff is a feature of the work. There are no tricks here to fool the uniformed interloper into the gallery world, no complex rationale denying the recognition of the image as being central to the work, no insistence that process is more important than product.

And, perhaps, all of this explains the popularity of his work with a broad audience; audiences that museums insist they want through their doors, normal people, people who don't particularly care for art.

Even in the more recent works drawing on literary sources, there is ambivalence in his gaze towards his central characters, the figures that might be 'heroes' if the viewer felt convinced that the artist subjectively shared their lurid fantasy worlds. Instead, even here, there seems to be a cutting insight into the social context of these character's dreams and imaginations. It's almost as if he can't help it. It never feels as if he is diminishing or criticising the dreams of these somewhat thwarted individuals, but there is a sense that, even when the artist's eye is painting the heightened and imaginary mindscapes, his feet remain firmly rooted on the ground. He may secretly hope for them to reach a better place, but he seems hesitant to collude with assuring them of certain success.

What his work shares with all of the other artists discussed above is a set of relationships to video and television imagery - and an decision to build their communications by not using video technologies (or indeed other "popular" forms) but instead, using very traditional crafts and techniques.

In the work of these artists, perhaps the use of these techniques stands as a response of some kind to the dominance of video, photography and digital images in our contemporary visual culture. However, regardless of the individual artist's concerns one thing that they additionally share -other than a form of recognition of the dominance of popular visual cultures- is an implicit reliance on these dominant visual cultures in communicating with the viewer. Without the saturation of MTV imagery, would we understand so quickly the people in David Hancock's work? Without the genre of retro-stylee videos that first rose to prominence in the late 1980's, would we have as much insight into the post-modern retro subcultures of Abetz/Drescher's paintings? Or without the rap video or MTV documentaries showing us the "scene" on desolate housing estates across northern Europe, would we correctly read the dress codes of Kevin Francis Gray's sculptures?

Douglas Coupland in his seminal novel "Generation X" -incidentally the generation to which a number of these artists belong- describes "obscurism" as one of the features of Generation X. This obscurism could be viewed as a forceful need to find and celebrate cultish objects of desire in the face of growing global consumerism and monocultures; to own things and know stuff that other people don't. The Pop Video Era and the subsequent Internet era have highlighted the paradoxical nature of such obscurism: nothing can be hidden from others now that we have the Internet yet at the same time, so much choice means that we seldom have shared mass media experiences.

A similar paradox exists in the work of these artists. The works intrinsically exists out of a choice to apply talents and deeply traditional skills to make physical objects in media associated with historic visual arts practice, yet, simultaneously, full access to its content relies on the viewers' exposure to contemporary media and technologies.

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