

Mark Amerika 23.07.1997

Surf-Sample-Manipulate: Playgiarism On The Net

At the opening of his influential essay entitled "Critifiction: Imagination As Plagiarism," novelist and critic Raymond Federman [1] says:

We are surrounded by discourses: historical, social, political, economic, medical, judicial, and of course literary.

Raymond Federman

He then goes on to suggest two things: one, that the imagination should be used as an essential tool that leads to the formulation of a discourse and, two, that the practice of plagiarism is embedded within the creative process since the writing of a discourse always implies bringing together pieces of other discourses. This reminds me of a conversation I once had with the novelist Kathy Acker [2]. We were on a radio program together in Boulder, Colorado, and the interviewer asked her where she got her "writer's voice" from? Acker replied "What voice? There's no voice in my work: I just steal shit."

Of course she does much more than "just steal shit." But Acker, along with Federman and many artists before them including Lautreamont, Apollinaire, the Cubists, and Dadaists, all participated in what I'm calling the anti-aesthetic practice of "surf-sample-manipulate." When applied to a post-material digital world of instantaneous composition and delivery via the Internet, this "surf-sample-manipulate" practice (i.e., to surf the net, sample data and then alter that data to meet the specific needs of the environment being developed by the artist) works on two fronts: one, the so-called "creative content," that is, the text, images, music, and graphics of many web-art sites are often sampled from other sources and, after some digital-manipulation, immediately integrated into the work so as to create an "original" construction and, two: the so-called "source code" itself, that is, the html-language that informs the browser how to display the work, is many times appropriated from other designs floating around the Net and eventually filtered into the screen's behind-the-scenes compositional structure. The great thing about the Net is that if you see something you like, whether that be "content" or "source code," many times you can just download the entire document and manipulate it according to your anti-aesthetic needs.

Keeping this in mind, the web can be viewed an open-platform whose symbolic space is ready for all sorts of creative manipulation that the contemporary artist can use to breakdown our traditional relationship with the one discourse that has dominated most of our lives, that is, the media discourse.

Of course, what I'm describing here is the digital equivalent of collage-art, one where the contemporary artist uses the forms of the new media to subvert the commercial redundancy of that same new media. Federman's own brand of collage-art, what he calls "pla[y]giarism" (the inclusion of the extra letter y signals his desire to turn the creative practice into one of playfulness and performance), is just one of the latest extensions of this sort of activity, one that has taken off with the techno music scene but that has much more potential in the network culture.

Whereas collage itself has been around since we've been able to historicize art in culture, the technique was first used as a radical formal device in painting by the cubists. Picasso and Braque, looking to move beyond the problems presented by analytic cubism, were hoping to challenge the illusionistic preference of all painterly art coming out at the beginning of the century and so began incorporating found objects into their paintings. As mentioned in my first Amerika Online column, it was around the time that cubism came into art's historical current that Marinetti, Duchamp and Schwitters, to name a few, all began appropriating objects from the material world in order to better explore *the idea* of painting in the modern world. Eventually these ideas, which were part of an overall shift in 20th century art to move art's subject matter away from "nature" so as to focus on the material culture itself, came to full fruition in the post-Pollack

work of artists like Robert Rauschenberg whose "combines" took us into a categorical no-man's-land, a place where ontological chaos and the superimposition of pop-culture imagery and brand-name identity onto the fetishized art-object helped launch the Pop Art movement.

But as all valuable tools and formal innovations eventually risk losing their potential liberatory power by getting absorbed into a cultural tide that insists on the continual proliferation of new consumer-friendly processes, so the art of collage, which reached its apex in the postmodern era, must now look for alternative spaces to exhibit its radical recombinations of anti-aesthetic drift. The most obvious place for this shift to occur is cyberspace, the pixellated environment where the material we recontextualize into new forms of potential meaning is in many ways "immaterial." Whereas the use of junkyard detritus from the post-industrial ruins of everyday life has become almost commonplace in the garage-sale poetics of the contemporary art world, our new-found ability to convert so much of our contemporary cultural work into easily manipulable binary code, sets up a heretofore unheard of environment from which to engender new contexts of artistic performance and, if possible, create para-media constructs that assault the banal production values inherent in mainstream culture.

World War III is a guerrilla information war, with no division between military and civilian participation.

Marshall MacLuhan

Perhaps McLuhan had no idea just how right he'd be. When one considers how fast the Internet has been transformed from a military network protocol to a consumer-application, it's great to see that the Avant-Pop plagiaristic practice is being put to good use all over cyberspace.

For those interested in the hypermedia permaculture of "temporary autonomous zones," [The Plagiarist Codex](#) [3], developed by the folks who run the [Dreamtime Talkingmail Site](#) [4], is a good place to start. Culture jamming the corporate propaganda machine via politically-motivated plagiarism is alive and well at sites like [McSpotlight](#) [5] and [Adbusters](#) [6], where the site-creators assure us that "the shining hope for a revolution in human consciousness lies in the actions of everyday people." Perhaps the most complete guide to contemporary plagiaristic practice is to be found at the [Neoism](#) [7] site, particularly [their self-referential index page on all things plagiaristic](#) [8]. The opening epigraph by artist Harry Polkinhorn, where he states that "it would be better to say that no one owns anything, not even a physical body much less a mind or a soul," is exemplary. Of course, all of our friends from the book culture, bound by the copyright laws that inform the discussion around so-called intellectual property, have a hard time dealing with this sort of blatant disregard for the concepts of ownership and originality.

The most interesting hypermedia art project I've yet to experience and that employs the Avant-Pop practice of "surf-sample-manipulate" to great effect, is Jacques Servin's [BEAST\(TM\)](#) [9]. Servin, who is the author of two books of fiction called *Aviary Slag* and *Mermaids For Attila*, is known throughout the Net community as [the notorious programmer](#) [10] who hacked the pre-Christmas shipment of SimCopter - an action game from the makers of SimCity 2000 - where he supplemented the game's cast of pulchritudinous female "Sims" with broad-shouldered male "Sims" who, in tight swimsuits, go around kissing everything in sight, including each other.

By exhibiting BEAST(TM) at the SEAFAIR 97 event in Skopje, Macedonia, Servin, part novelist/part programmer, enters the international electronic arts scene with a skills-set not usually seen on the web. His sampling of various texts from Benjamin to Benn to new voices he's invented, music loops stolen from various programs including the Windows system, and images from a wide range of popular magazines circa 1930, are integrated into a monster Java applet that anyone with a Pentium 120 or higher will want to explore (some of the faster Powermacs can be used as well). The Java applet is quite memory-heavy so those who have slower machines will have to wait through a longer initial download time -- but this is one instance where it's definitely worth the wait!

The DEATH screen I linked to immediately presented me with a quote from Walter Benjamin's "One Way Street" but before I could finish reading the sampled text, all sorts of wild and unruly things began happening as the huge Java applet continued downloading its chaotic hit of hallucinatory madness: specially-encoded error-boxes kept popping into view trying to explain what my problem was (my problem, I soon realized, was coming to the WWW with Great Expectations), while middle-eastern techno-music tried to soothe me back into the surfing groove. As the artist himself says in a recent statement:

...while [BEAST(TM)] highlights the ugliness of computer technology, it also leads the user to see the harmony in it, since the profusion of images, warnings, sounds and tyrannical acts on the part of the system have an ultimately pleasing rhythm.

Jacques Servin

By interacting with this sort narratological behaviorism, *"the user is inducted into understanding his or her own complicity in this state of affairs."* By clicking within the skating images that continuously float by, more readable text fragments are spilled into the screen only to be overtaken by yet more amazing graphics that skate across the screen in ways animated gifs can't even dream of (excuse me if I'm personifying animated gifs, but one wonders if animated gifs aren't, for now, some kind of post-historic life-form soon on the verge of extinction). Clicking on the skating images led to more music shifts and, yes, more programmed "warning" messages that purposely filled up the screen in lightning-speed progression so that it was (intentionally) difficult to understand what these intrusive screens actually said. One message that kept popping up started with words "Please. Please..." -- as if testing our "user-friendly" patience. The artist's attempt to load our experience with invisible "Frustration Plug-Ins" and disorienting audio streams creates an unusual comedy of errors, a kind of Shakespearean black humor that uses hypermedia typography as its cast of characters.

The medium that has emerged on the Web, and that continues to dominate commercial esthetics in general, is one that fosters, and subtly depends on, utter transience of attention. Extending television's effects through its much-vaunted interactivity, hypertext as it exists on the Web has served to render writing into "content"--something to squeeze between flashy images and absorb any drops of attention that might accidentally spill.

Beast(TM) relies on a hypertext system which I designed as an alternative to web-style links. Instead of jumping from text to text, the reader can direct the progress of a single text by interaction with the text itself and with illustrations which float by in seeming 3-D. By this means the interactive possibilities of the medium are tapped without compromising the meditative approach to text for which we are trained, and which depends on the text appearing at once, allowing the eye to be a hypertext engine far more sophisticated than any that could be devised. I would not say that linked texts are inherently corrupt; this comes down to a matter of personal preference, evolved from bombardment by so much web "content".

Jacques Servin

(It should be noted that, like most hypermedia creations now being teleported into the Net, BEAST (TM) is very much a work-in-progress and the artist says that the amount of content will more than double in the next month or two. For a look at these future developments, you'll want to read the latest version of his artist's statement [11].

Whereas many seasoned web-surfers are becoming familiar with the "bombardment" that Servin speaks of, very few are creating digital objects that actually intervene in the web's ongoing creative process. BEAST(TM) signals yet another crucial break with an over-aestheticized art-for-art's-sake mentality that seems to be festering on the web. By employing innovative forms of multi-media language that have been

excluded from most literary productions confined to book media, Servin presents us with a narrative construction that exhibits to us once again the Apollinaire dictum that, "*reality will never be discovered once and for all*", and that truth, should such a thing exist, is always on the edge of becoming something else entirely different from what we thought it was.

Mark Amerika's new web project, GRAMMATRON, is located at www.grammatron.com [12]

Previous Version of [Amerika On-Line Nr.3](#) [13].

Links

- [1] <http://www.federman.com>
- [2] <http://acker.thehub.com.au/>
- [3] <http://www.net22.com/qazingulaza/codex/codex.html>
- [4] <http://www.net22.com/qazingulaza/>
- [5] <http://www.mcspotlight.org>
- [6] <http://www.adbusters.org>
- [7] <http://www.neoism.org>
- [8] http://www.neoism.org/squares/plagiarism_index.html
- [9] <http://www.quake.net/~jacq/Beast/>
- [10] <http://www.wired.com/news/topframe/775.html>
- [11] <http://www.altx.com/hyperx/beast.html>
- [12] <http://www.grammatron.com>
- [13] <http://www.heise.de/tp/english/kolumnen/ame/3076/1.html>

Telepolis Artikel-URL: <http://www.telepolis.de/english/kolumnen/ame/3098/1.html>