
An Essay
Of Mere Art

By Albert Stabler

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In the plan of the Great Dance plans without number interlock, and each movement becomes in its season the breaking into flower of the whole design to which all else had been directed... All that is made seems planless to the darkened mind, because there are more plans than it looked for.

--C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra*

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Nothing could be more postmodern than viewing the world as information, information as a huge totalizing concept. Reading and knowledge can be broken into discrete positive chunks, apart from any transcendent qualities like truth and beauty. Lacan says that the unconscious is structured like a language, and the reverse seems like an equally valid claim. These information chunks, these hot magnets of desire, operate by their own alien logic, and form our minds in their image. In doing so, power is exerted and exchanged, and pleasures are invented and directed, in the name of abject debasement. Information is reality stripped of its fine garments. It is cold, inhuman, and absolute. It is porn.

What's left out by this idea of information? The icon, I would argue - a signifier that blurs into its signified, an attempt to represent what Claude Levi-Strauss called "the excess of meaning." A proper icon is community-dependent, not absolute. To those receivers, an icon is not a symbol, in the sense that it occupies one particular place in a string of associations. An icon stops association in its tracks. Certainly many aspects of culture embody this, but theologian Karl Barth is quite explicit in his declaration that, rather than any form of revelation, insight, or reason, "Jesus Christ", as concept, name, personage, and deity, is both the beginning and the end of the Christian faith. In Wallace Stevens' poem "Of Mere Being" he describes what escapes thought as "a gold-feathered bird" in "the palm at the end of the mind." An icon could be anything, but it stands in for nothing.

The economy of fluids and pleasure in pornography faces its own contradictory leftover, Bataille's "accursed share," in the idea of unlimited love. Outside of lustful and murderous desires, this inclusive and expansive love is the "agape" in the story of the Good Samaritan, a compassion so self-denying, so outside of normal expectations that it approaches insanity. It seems like a death wish. If beauty has any meaning, if truth has any beauty, it is through grasping at this invisible, impossible empathy between isolated organisms. At times, art has served this purpose, despite its far more customary deployment in sordid rituals of pacifying propaganda and self-aggrandizing display. Is it possible that we can now only represent invisible connections through graphical metrics?

The representation of an icon would presumably indicate this kind of attempt at love. Rather than being a meaningful statement, a piece of art may once have merely denoted an empty place, a kind of "unknown" around which the subtle and intricate patterns of the world subtly begin to coalesce and revolve. But "mere art" may have hit a wall. Following the massive desacralization of material desire in the industrial age, modern mystics have attempted to sustain this kind of image power by redefining the available tropes of high and low culture toward a suggestive profundity, but stumble when forced to use the information-oriented visual language of abstraction. From the geometric sprites of Paul Klee to the cosmic cubism of Borges' compatriot Xul Solar to the numerological experiments of Simon Governor, to the mystical actions and spaces and writings of Joseph Beuys and

Paul Thek, these moving exceptions have only proven the rule that the time for visual enunciations of the unutterable has, at least for now, passed us by. Anthropological and psychopathological instrumentalization in the outsider art market only makes that point crystal clear.

More often, icons are only legitimated through their profanation, a continual retelling of the fundamental crisis-myth of modernity. "Icon porn" has proliferated in fine art ever since Marcel Duchamp put a toilet on a sculpture pedestal. In the violent disillusionment of German expressionism, the coded defamiliarization of surrealism, Damien Hirst's dissected sharks, Wim Delvoye's Baroque turd tiles, holiness has been ecstatically abolished in a seemingly endless process of mourning an irreplaceable loss, a hope that, as Žižek would have it, trauma and loss can offer "privileged access to the Real." In this, the garish cynicism of Jeff Koons and the brutal austerity of Minimalism are mired in a similarly nostalgic attempt to rescue meaning by rupturing the infinite humanist grid that delegitimizes every attempt at establishing a center. Despite the furious striving of much of this art, so much of it is based on faulty assumptions and blunt ideas, the result is ironic defeatism, and mere infotainment.

Love remains an endlessly exploited concept, but one that seems, by its nature, to have a kernel that resists debasement by commercial interchangeability. Its currency has fueled projects of "info love," in which artists, despite their inevitable ghettoization, have continued to propose an imaginary dimension in their work that doesn't propose sedentary entertainment, gratification, or reflection, but an stance of resistance that simultaneously tears down walls of alienation in hierarchies both aesthetic and sociopolitical. Jacques Rancière expresses this transcendent democratic wish, optimistically venturing that "absolutely anyone can take over and redirect the power invested in language." Rancière also speaks of the "visual regime of modernity," and opposes to it performance and installation work that has finally vanquished the boundary between art and life. The work done in this vein is probably the most avowedly progressive in the realm of legitimate fine art: the apocalyptic video projections of Paul Chan, the salvage-based constructions and publications of Temporary Services, the installation manifestoes of Thomas Hirschorn, the data tableaux of Alice Creischer, and the research-heavy documentary art of Walead Beshty, Trevor Pagden, and Julia Meltzer and David Thorne. And yet, this Situationist utopia is an imaginary fulfillment of the humanist trope of universal transparency; it is an art of ideology, and thus fantasy. Fantasy might be enough to drive worthwhile local projects and improve peoples' lives, but it can do nothing to resolve the dilemma of art, trapped deep in a dark parochial crack between discourses on economics, entertainment, and religion.

So we end up back with information and porn. Art is deprived of boundaries, and thus becomes utterly and endlessly debased at the same moment it gains total flexibility, and the ideas it offers can only be exchanged when they are fungible enough for the global free market of competing relevancies prefigured by abstraction. An escape route from this enlightened hell may only possible through some incredible act of regression, perhaps of both the statistical and the

developmental variety. "Mere art" may need to be found again through the back door, by sublime immersion in data, transmuting or transubstantiating information into something inexpressible. If the rabidly exploitive cognitive machinations of this festival somehow cough up a computation for atonement, we will all be eternally grateful. Whether this work succeeds in anything so grand is a matter for individual contemplation-- lengthy, intensive individual contemplation.

The work being featured in Select Media Festival 7 certainly has a different look than the scruffy monastic realpolitik or esoteric obliqueness of the recent "info love" work mentioned above. But there's still plenty of literary emoting in these vectorized charts. Stephanie Posavec's narratology-oid "Writing Without Words" diagrams, Nicholas Feltron's personal "Annual Report," and Jonathan Harris' adventurous, data-mining of the heart in "The Whale Hunt" and "We Feel Fine," all have an explicit subjective component that illustrate an amusing mingling of analysis with personal experience. These have the strange irony of seeming like public radio personal essays crystallized into dense statistical patterns, Chris Ware comics without cartoon people, but retaining his precious pathos and his hallucinatory Bauhaus illustration-- a seeming spoof on the legacy of Dave Eggers' McSweeney's publishing mini-empire. Love is undermined by transparency, and we get the distant voyeuristic cruelty of porn.

While we're comparing this informational artwork to high-end cultural pamphlets, the festival boasts an appealing dazzle reminiscent of Cabinet magazine, the publication that prompted the rarely glib philosopher Slavoj Žižek to burst forth with the plug-blurb "ferociously intelligent." The crisply designed political network maps of the Tangential University, the nebulous digital matrices of the University of Texas "bioinformatics" project, Jean Livet's genome meta-map "Protein Homology Project" and Yunchui Kim's animated data flow "(void)traffic" (both part of the MoMA "Design and the Elastic Mind" exhibit), Aaron Koblin's flight pattern trajectory-tangle, and the superimposed signifier grids produced by Catalog Tree share a shimmering perfection, visual super-polyrhythms of harmonious complexity that resonate with the revelatory C.S. Lewis epigraph. The "meat" part of that ubiquitous '90s theory bugbear, the cyborg, is completely absent. In a disembodied code stream, any one can be a phallus, any zero can be an orifice.

The absurdity of these hyper-signifying sexy surfaces of raw content is a perfect response to the flat technology-parroting emptiness of abstract or conceptual modern art, but stripped of the veneer of material authenticity and gestural touch, not to mention intellectual and spiritual direction. The art in Select Media Festival is a veritable seraglio of shameless ostentation, a megamall of symbolic voyeurism. Rather than the mythical figure of Antonio Gramsci's "organic intellectual," in Select we have the inverse: a passive sense of mastery elicited by the artifice of at-hand knowledge. But once every coffee stain or crack in the street becomes a constellation of subtle equations, the last step is going to be to ask what, if anything, lies behind and previous to this infinite abundance of a priori inevitability. And if, in this place beyond thought, there can be art.