

Ghostly Media: What Would an Invoking Medium Look Like?

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In 'Living with Ghosts' (*Art and Research*, Summer 07) Jan Verwoert differentiates between the appropriation of the 1980s and that of the present by making a distinction between the places of the historical within the cultural conditions that characterize the two periods. He argues that unlike the 1980s when history appeared (at least to some) to have run its course, we now find ourselves in a world filled with the ghosts of competing historical narratives. Citing Derrida, Verwoert concludes that an ethical maxim directing us to 'learn "how to let them [these ghosts] speak or how to give them back their speech" [should] serve as a practical guide for appropriation today'. He proposes that appropriation perform 'the unresolved by staging the object, images or allegories that invoke the ghosts of unclosed histories in a way that allows them to appear as ghosts and reveal the nature of their ambiguous presence.'¹

While inclined to accept Verwoert's analysis, it leaves me with some questions as both a producer and consumer of contemporary cultural practices. Do the differences he describes primarily result in a shift in the reception of appropriation and for that matter its currency? Or is appropriation as practiced today somehow marked (perhaps literally) in terms of its production? If some contemporary practices seek to appropriate 'temporally layered objects with critical intent,'² where and how do artists working today make such strategies explicit? Subsequently, do the answers to these questions provide insight into other *returns* within contemporary practice - namely, the *return* to a new kind of medium-specificity, accompanied by an apparent return of at least partial autonomy claimed by both art objects and practices?

In comparing 80s and contemporary practices it seems appropriate to consider not only the 'cultural experience [of] the discourse of appropriation' but also the method of these appropriations. In general terms 80s appropriation was dominated by then state-of-the-art photographic technologies and sophisticated fabrication, what Verwoert describes as the 'dead elegance of the Cibachrome.' By contrast, contemporary examples seem to explicitly eschew the possibilities of digital technologies³ that now dominate reproduction in favour of more 'basic' techniques: film, photography, drawing⁴ and the collection and repurposing of objects and images.

It is often suggested that the re-emergence of drawing among other media is the result of a market-driven need to re-inscribe the 'hand,' the 'mark,' and more importantly labour of the artist into the appropriated image. While this may be true, I suspect that such re-inscriptions have much deeper connections to economies - monetary, political and libidinal - than can be summarized by an ever-expanding list of art fairs.

The work of Andrea Bowers is perhaps revealing in this respect. Bowers' use of meticulously drawn copies of documents and photographs depend on the highly labour-intensive means of their reproduction to convey Bowers' devotion to the histories that she uncovers in her research. They also allow her to juxtapose and conflate various histories of political activism, mass protest and personal struggle.

In her 2006 exhibition *Nothing is Neutral* at the RedCat exhibition space in Los Angeles and at ArtPace, San Antonio, Bowers combined highly refined hyper-realistic pencil drawings of documents with other appropriations – video re-enactments, photocopies and pieces of wrapping paper. This mix of appropriative strategies allows her to bring together areas of research that reflect on histories of American political participation and representation: early abortion rights activism, the representation of contemporary war journalism, and Vietnam-era combinations of anti-war and feminist youth activism.

Letters to the Army of Three, is based on her investigation of a group of three women largely forgotten in official accounts of US abortion rights struggles, who set up a clandestine network that supported women seeking abortions in the late 1950s and 1960s. Part of this body of work includes 12 exact pencil copies of letters received by the group from women seeking advice on how to gain access to then illegal abortions. These letters often contain harrowing accounts of personal, social and legal crises. A checkerboard grid of enlarged prints of a more extensive collection of these letters and wrapping paper of the sort one may have found in the houses from which these women were writing accompanied these drawings along with video re-enactments of the letters.

Eulogies to One and Another (2006) [Fig. 1] is a grid of 20 enlarged newspaper obituaries of Marla Ruzicka, an American, and Faiz Ali Salim, an Iraqi, both of whom were killed attempting to get an accurate count of deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq. What becomes apparent, due in large part to the equal treatment of the visual material in these drawings, is the very unequal treatment of Ruzicka and Ali Salim in the textual material presented.



Fig. 1. *Letters of an Army of Three*, Installation View, in "Nothing Is Neutral", RedCat Gallery, Los Angeles 2006 (courtesy of Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects)

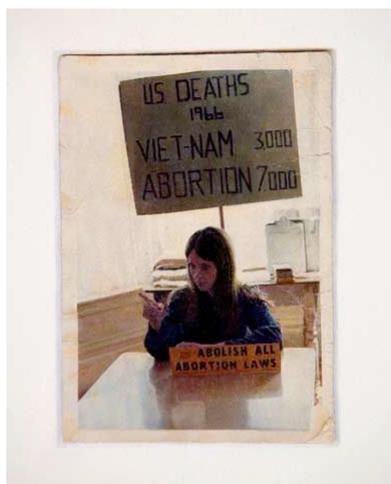


Fig. 2. *Young Abortion Right Activist, San Francisco Bay Area, 1966* (photo lent from the Archives of Patricia Maginnis), 2005, color pencil on paper, 50" x 38 1/4", detail (courtesy of Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects)

In both shows these bodies of work are accompanied by other drawings of activist ephemera such as pins and buttons among other documents, including a large piece is titled *Young Abortion Right Activist, San Francisco Bay Area, 1966* (photo lent from the Archives of Patricia Maginnis) [Fig. 2]. Taken from the archive of a member of the Army of Three the image presents a young woman holding a sign that reads:

US Deaths 1966
Viet-nam 3,000
Abortion 7,000.

The picture is drawn at a scale appropriate to the document but on a large otherwise unmarked sheet. The image is elevated by its ability to 'hold' so much space, while possibly only a part of a much larger image or archive. The addition of this piece serves brings the other projects together but it does not reaffirm the binary reductions that so much political discourse depends on, including that of this image. The confusion of historical era marked by the recollection of an instantly recognizable though anonymous image of political action displays a category of social representation while questioning its place within a cultural and economic space capable of reducing the specificity of multiple struggles to the form of 'the political.'

The post-cold war experience of history springing to life described by Verwoert as determining the 'momentum' that lies beneath contemporary appropriation seems almost literally present in Bowers' use of current and past political and cultural artifacts. She reflects well-known tropes of political action including the apathetic possibility that 'not much changes' while forcing both the viewer and herself to ask about their own position vis-à-vis the past and the present.

Bowers' use of drawing is a structural marker of the shift from allegory to invocation as described in 'Living with Ghosts'. Verwoert replaces the postmodern allegory and its insistence on the arbitrariness of the sign, with an invocation dependant on a more contemporary understanding of the importance of performativity. Given this substitution, it does not seem surprising that works of appropriation betray and in many ways rely on the residues of the performative acts that call their subjects back from the beyond. As Verwoert points out through his own

invocation of Derrida, a double possession takes place: the artist takes possession of the appropriated object by performatively consuming it within a given practice, while at the same time that practice is possessed (in the ghostly sense) by the discourse that accompanies its act of appropriation. This double possession is embedded in today's artists' use of past social, political and aesthetic messages, documents, and practices and allows them to operate within realigned 'axes of space and time.' Furthermore, the formal characteristics of such practices depend on the re-inscription of labour and the idiosyncrasies of specific (obsolete) media, precisely as signs of this shift and of their own awareness of the precarious position in which they find themselves.



Fig. 3 Germaine Kruip, *Image Archive* (2 x 35mm slide images), (courtesy of The Swiss Institute/Contemporary Art, NY and Germaine Kruip)

Along with the reassertion of drawing as a means of appropriation there has been an emergence of recently obsolete technologies. The technologies of this generation of artists' early pedagogical experiences – 35mm slides and 16mm films – have come back from the school basements and eBay auctions to haunt us with images of the past.⁵ Belgian/Dutch artist Germaine Kruip's on-going project *Image Archive* presents 23 carefully selected pairs of 35mm slide images side-by-side in eight-second intervals [Fig. 3]. Though derived from sources as diverse as Dutch master paintings and Reuters pictures taken from newspapers, the images in each pair share uncanny formal resemblances. Unlike appropriations of mass archives in the 1980s (for example, Matt Mullican's bulletin boards, which revel in the arbitrariness of the sign), Kruip's archive depends on an insistence on practice extended to the formal content of the image. Where the practice of archiving, observing, selecting and displaying is key to both forms of appropriation, Kruip's attention to the images' compositional characteristics takes precedence over the onslaught of possible signifiers. As such, the images carry a surplus of meaning that extends beyond their specific content thanks to their being of temporally different moments and yet the same.

If earlier strategies depended on the power of photography to 'extend the range of the *mémoire volontaire*' in 'a society in which practice is in decline' projects like Kruip's foreground process within media marked by what has become the history of mechanical reproduction rather than its novelty⁶. They display the 'traces of the practiced hand' whose work allows *mémoire involontaire* to 'cluster around the object of a perception'.⁷ However, this hand is surely not that of the old or even the modern

master imbuing all it touches with the magic of aura. No longer the marker of technical craft, the hand seen in these practices is much more that of the skilled editor than that of the artisan. Even when literally present, as in Bowers' case, the hand of the appropriator is not that characterized by terms such as gesture or mark. As we will see, in a context in which the notion of the medium has been radically re-thought traces of practice, have much less to do with technique than with an attempt to define fields of competence within a given technical support.

In Kruijff's case, this editorial craft coupled with a medium that in and of itself evokes memory, triggers one unsettling correspondence after another as images and the histories they represent merge with our own struggle to find a position as we shuttle back and forth between competing recollections. It may seem odd to call upon *mémoire involontaire* in an argument about the return of historical specificity, but both Bowers and Kruijff seem to necessitate a possibility of thinking outside of history in order to be able to invoke the historical not as a product of historicism but as a field in which to 'blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history'⁸ – that is to give speech back to ghosts who have been marginalized by historical narrative. The oscillation between invoking specific histories and the underlying necessity to understand the historical as an object of investigation is seen in both Bowers' and Kruijff's appeal to multiple historical moments. It reminds us that 'voluntary and involuntary recollection [can] lose their mutual exclusiveness'⁹ particularly in an era in which the iconic photograph serves as the currency of commonly held experience and the metaphor underlying many psychological models of memory.¹⁰

The parallel re-emergence of appropriation and practices that seem to overtly display their lack of technological – not to say technical – currency seems more than coincidental. It could be argued that many of these practices – hand copying, 35mm slides, 16mm films, photograms, letterpress and other typographic processes - are themselves appropriated forms. A judgment on this must be left for another time. First, I would suggest that the emergence of such techniques constitutes a generalization of what Rosalind Krauss attributes to photography as 'the relationship between obsolescence and the redemptive possibilities enfolded within the outmoded itself.'¹¹

In discussions of the 'post-medium condition' Krauss takes great pains to differentiate between her uses of the term *medium* (she prefers 'technical support') from that handed down through modernist criticism that she identifies as 'the specific material support for a traditional aesthetic genre'.¹² The reinvented medium consists therefore not of

a restoration of any of the earlier forms of support that the 'age of mechanical reproduction' had rendered thoroughly dysfunctional through their own assimilation to the commodity form. Rather it concerns the idea of a medium as such, a medium as a set of conventions derived from (but not identical with) the material conditions of a given technical support, conventions out of which to develop a form of expressiveness that can be both projective and mnemonic.¹³

Taken in this light, the concern for specific modes of technical production seen in much contemporary appropriation is not the self-reflexive impulse to interrogate a specific material support, to make it 'about the medium' in the sense of modernist tautological autonomy. Rather it is an impulse to interrogate the very languages through which these appropriations are performed. It seems only logical that the re-emergence of appropriation as invocation in a post-postmodern condition be

accompanied by a reinvention of the medium in a post-medium condition - where neither modernity nor the medium return but nonetheless refuse to fully relinquish their spectral presence.

Rodney McMillian's use of found objects as paintings and sculptures is as much an engagement with specters whose conventions (and markets) he employs and often defies, as it is a meditation on the imaginary histories around the found objects that serve as the basis for his assisted ready-mades. McMillian's practice convincingly shows that as Verwoert says: 'the appropriated object [can] today still create this sudden moment of insight, ... it [can] show what (in a particular social context at a specific historical moment) it means for something to mean something.'¹⁴ In doing so, his manipulations of objects and contexts engages in a critical re-examination of the notion of medium, almost as if to say that the conventions thought to have been done away with, just like the histories that seemed to have been successfully suppressed, have sprung back to life and cannot be so easily negotiated away.



Fig. 4. *Unknown #4*, 2006, C-print (photograph by Gene Ogami), framed behind archival plexi, 39" x 31" (courtesy of Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects)

McMillian has used everything from found carpets and mattresses, to stuffed baboons as the basis for paintings, sculptures and installations. Spanning the three walls of an art fair booth in Miami, McMillian's *Unknown* (2006) series consists of an open edition of identically printed, mounted and framed photographs. Borrowing from the vernacular of conceptual photography, *Unknown* [Fig. 4] is a studio shot of a damaged bust of a possibly once-important man whose serious countenance is marred by chips in glossy black paint that exposes the plaster beneath. Each photograph was to be sold as a unique work individually titled *Unknown #1, 2, 3...* Here the use of appropriation not only calls upon the viewer to speculate on the possible history and unknown origins of the found object but also takes up the photographic language of appropriation and the assumed commodity critique that accompanies it. However, unlike its 1980s counterparts, *Unknown* does not sterilize these conventions at the end of history. It does not guild an already elevated urinal. Rather, in the act of appropriation in the *Unknown* series, McMillian re-inscribes yet another uncompleted history: the history of appropriation itself whose greatest trope is the sterile

photograph, not quite 'the dead elegance of the Cibachrome' but close enough to count.

I hope that through these few examples I have been able to suggest a way in which the temporal incision produced by invocation is not only a result of the altered spatio-temporal axes but is also marked on the side of practice by an invocation of the reinvented medium; that along with a double possession embedded in the performance of contemporary appropriation, there exists a double invocation: one on the level of the signified - the historical - and the other, on the level of the signifier - the medium. Perhaps through this double doubling contemporary practice can fulfill Verwoert's hope that appropriation expose the 'unresolved moments of latent presence as they are,' without suggesting 'their resolution in the moment of their exhibition.'¹⁵

¹ Jan Verwoert, 'Living with Ghosts: From Appropriation to Invocation in Contemporary Art', *Art and Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, Volume 1. No. 2. (Summer 2007), p. 7. [online] <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/pdfs/verwoert.pdf> [Accessed EG 1 June 2008]

² Verwoert, 'Living with Ghosts', *Art and Research*, Vol. 1. No. 2., p. 3.

³ In recent cases where that being appropriated is in fact so recently passed that it is digital from the beginning the results often seem less critical than nostalgic. One need only look to the proliferation of retooled video games and consoles that have accompanied the rehashed icons of the nominally resistant antics of suburban male adolescence seen in recent years.

⁴ Perhaps ironically in Verwoert's article one of the few examples he cites is that of Robert Longo. While Longo's use of drawing is similar to that seen in some newer practices I doubt that the reception or intent was what I would like to advance as the current impulse behind the use of drawing. In much of his work from the 80s Longo's work evokes the language of film as he performs translations from one medium to another of his own photographs in a way that often intended to compete with the deadly grandeur and elegance of the cibachrome.

⁵ For another example of this see Lisa Oppenheim's *The Sun Is Always Setting Somewhere Else* <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/sunsets2.html>

⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,' *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (Glasgow: Fontana, 1973) p. 188.

⁷ Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,' *Illuminations*, p. 188.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (Glasgow: Fontana, 1973) p. 263.

⁹ Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,' *Illuminations*, p. 160.

¹⁰ That the photographic is the site at which the personal and the historical are thought to intersect can be seen in the elaboration of psychological models such as *flashbulb memories* which theorize the seemingly involuntary recollection of the circumstances in which we learn of historically significant events, such as the assassination of a political figure. Though significantly modified since its conception in 1977 by R. Brown and J. Kulik, the theory of *flashbulb memory* explicitly relies on photographic metaphors. See: William F. Brewer, *The theoretical and empirical status of the flashbulb memory hypothesis*, in *Affect and Accuracy in Recall: studies in 'flashbulb memories'* ed. E. Winograd and U. Niesser, the Cambridge U. Press, 1992.

Finkenauer, Luminet, Gisle, et al., *Flashbulb memories and the underlying mechanisms of their formation: Toward an emotional-integrative model*. *Memory and Cognition*, 1998, 26(3), p. 516-531.

Brian O'Connell: *Proposal: Flashbulbs: Project at the Central Library, Leuven, Belgium*: <http://www.boconnell.org/leuven.html>

¹¹ Rosalind Krauss, 'Reinventing the Medium', *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1999, Vol 25, No 2. p. 290.

¹² Rosalind Krauss, 'Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition', *October* 116, Spring 2006, p. 55-6.

¹³ Krauss, 'Reinventing the Medium', *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1999, Vol 25, No 2. p. 296.

¹⁴ Verwoert, 'Living with Ghosts', *Art and Research*, Vol. 1. No. 2., p. 3.

¹⁵ Jan Verwoert, 'Living with Ghosts', *Art and Research*, Vol. 1. No. 2., p. 7.