

Washington University in St. Louis

Washington University Open Scholarship

Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers

College of Art

Spring 5-20-2016

Artificiality and the New Image: the Image Body

Liza H. Butts

Washington University in St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#), and the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Butts, Liza H., "Artificiality and the New Image: the Image Body" (2016). *Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers*. 8.

<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa/8>

This Unrestricted is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Art at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.

Liza Butts

Artificiality and the New Image: the Image Body

May 6, 2016

BFA in Art: unconcentrated

Minor in Urban Studies

Washington University in St. Louis, Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts

Abstract

This paper sets up a historical argument for how images exist in the world and how artists relate to these images. The questions of the paper are concerned with defining the “Contemporary Image” and looking at how the digitization of all the images in our world affect the art object and the experience of art in the physical world. The conclusion and answer to these questions is found in a resistance to images that oversaturate our culture. This resistance occurs by looking to the painted image to function as a body in the world; aware of its existence, responsive to what is happening around it, and shifting and moving according to stimuli.

Introduction

I am using the term “Contemporary Image” as an identifier that refers to all images of today that are produced in the present time we live in. The term categorizes the images based off of shared characteristics that reflect the concerns of the society and culture we live in, and the technologies of the time. I would like to provide a short overview that identifies the characteristics and problematic areas of the Contemporary Image in how it relates to my work and how I experience it as a young artist and a twenty-first century millennial. I would like to preface this overview by saying that I am creating my own definition of the Contemporary Image based off of my research and observations I have gathered from the images I encounter. There could be multiple definitions of the Contemporary Image; these are the conclusions that I have come to through my practice, in an attempt to contextualize my own work and make sense of what my role is as an artist in our highly advanced world that is saturated by images.

What does the Contemporary Image look like?

This identifier the “Contemporary Image” speaks to all images present around us today that are not art objects. The identifier does not include contemporary painting, photography, digital art, or any other fine art images. However the Contemporary Image does include photographic replications of contemporary art objects. I am going to classify the Contemporary Image as an image that is distinct in its experience, accessibility, viewership, and saturation in our everyday lives. The Contemporary Image is not a physical image; it is a

digital image that is viewed on a device or screen—mostly smart phones and laptops. Even though there are printed images existing around us today, I'm going to exclude them from my definition because printed images have less presence in our lives today. The primary source of image viewing is through the screen. What is interesting about the Contemporary Image is how it lacks physical tangibility. Although it lacks physical tangibility, there is an interesting contradiction between this and in how intimately we interact with the image. Our interaction with it on smart phone devices is very intimate in scale. The scale of the image remains equal to the size of our hand. We can click the image with our finger, enlarge it, literally hold it in our hand; yet, it is something that exists as light pixels behind a thin glass screen. It is not something that sits beside our bedside table. It does, but within our devices and embedded in the safari pages or Instagram profiles of our phones that are perpetually in use and alerting us (Winograd). As soon as the screen breaks—many of us have experienced this phenomenon with the easily shattered iPhone—the image structure is threatened. But no fear! Most likely, that image can be accessed on another technological device. So there is this confliction that the images exist eternally and without damage in the realm of the Internet, but within our physical everyday lives we see images only as long as our aluminum and glass devices exist without breakage. We rely on this third body to illuminate the images that capture our world.

How does the state of the Contemporary Image affect the art object and why do artists need to consider this?

Artists have to consider that their work is not only being seen in person. I question people's desire to see works in person when they are so easily accessible on the Internet. What is problematic about the Contemporary Image is the availability of it. Museum collections are almost entirely replicated online on institutions' websites that provide libraries of the whole collection (Wu and Herminia). These viewing platforms, Artstor is the best example, standardize entire collections of work. Some people might argue that a good extent of visual information is lost in photographic replications of work. Often times these online collections have incredible photographic resolution and include features that allow you to zoom in to see high definition frames of the work. For example, if a collage work is photographed and available on a site, a good quality zoom feature will allow you to see dimension and differentiation where the layers of paper overlap in the collage. You might even be able to catch a good detail frame where an edge of paper is not fully adhered to the surface of the work. Isn't this type of digital vision almost as good or even better than seeing it in person? You can see everything you would see in person with clear, sharp detail. The question really is—what exactly is the difference between seeing a large data image of a work that gives you so much information and seeing it physically in person.

The viewing experience of artwork is shifting and solidifying quickly on the web (Wu and Herminia 41-45). There are strange promises to this in that perhaps this unravels the elitism of the art world if anyone and everyone can view works of art from the comfort of their own device at any time. For example, my website is posted on my Instagram profile. Anyone who follows my profile can view my work, even if that person has no interest in contemporary

painting. A simple click on the link opens up my website that displays my work. So either this minimizes the necessity of a museum space to view work, or it further specializes it. Because this means that viewing work in person could gather more value. Sure, we can see it online, but supposedly that's just a photograph.

How does painting fit in with other images around us?

I'm going to classify painting as an "Artist-made Image" to broaden the genre of painting and include other hand-made images for the sake of this short overview. The painted image is a different type of image from the others that surround us. Contemporary and modern painting is distinct in that it is an image that is aware of itself and aware of its existence, and critiques its own existence. I want to look at painting as an image that is remarkable in that it is produced from a human being, not a camera or other imaging device. Before Joseph Niepce produced the first photograph in 1814, the painted or handmade image was the only image we had available to us (Henderson). Artists were responsible for recording the events and historical moments taking place around them. Painting was an incredibly skilled craft that had a practical and necessary place in the world. The artist was needed and relied on to observe what was happening in the environment and become trained enough to have the ability to depict it. It was important that paintings such as Eugene Delacroix's works, that document the French Revolution, portray an image that is realistic and accurate. These works had to record what was happening in a language that paralleled to what people saw in the world around them. Intentional abstraction was irrelevant at this point. With the invention

of the camera, painting became no longer needed as images that function to record events. This machine can do everything painters were doing with the click of a button. Artists throughout time have always been faced with the challenge of working in competition with the technologies that develop and begin to challenge the skills and tools that artists use to respond to the world they are living in. Today, I can make a “faux” abstract painting in two seconds on Photoshop by opening an image found on the web and applying the Fragment and Twirl filters. But this is what makes art so fascinating, because even though artists are always being challenged by the technologies that develop, we are also always working against them and readjusting our role in the world according to the time. This happens in conscious ways and unconscious ways, but it always happens.

My Work

My work is based in painting and sculptural installation. I have been making physical painted images that reference digital photographic images but are not produced from photographic references. The work is driven by an attitude of resistance towards digitized media. Since physical images are in a state of fragility—they are not necessarily going out of style, but they are continuously in competition with their digital counterparts on the web, I’m focused on making work that has a physical presence and a fragility in existence. This means my work is made of materials that don’t hold up to a lot of movement, and the works are not produced with permanence in mind or using archival processes. In fact, I would love for my paintings to completely disintegrate within a few years after their completion.

I paint with oil paint on paper. The paper is thin, and almost textureless. The paint glides over the surface and sits within the paper similarly to how an image fits seamlessly within a screen, but the paper holds the image very differently. Paper is absorptive so areas of the painting sit within the particles of the paper. However in other areas, the image rests more physically on the surface when I paint with heavier pigment. I mimic the reflectivity of the screen with glossy layers of paint that reflect light and deflect the viewer from being able to view past the surface of the painting. The paper allows for beautiful layering and surface development, but it is constantly susceptible to tears, bending, and breakages. I hang the paintings on the wall by nailing directly through the surface of the painting. Thus, the edges accumulate holes that reveal physical touch and interaction with the image and cause the top part of the painting to gradually break off. Therefore the state of the painting is constantly in a state of change and reveals fragility in how it exists physically on the wall.

The thesis work consists of two paintings. The first titled *Float, sink: image body 1* and the second one titled *Hover, drop: image body 2* (see images A, B, and C). These paintings embrace a visual language that mimics the glitches and light leaks that occur when the image-displaying device begins to break down. The paintings take on a visual speed. The images are not in focus they are blurry, they are moving, but they are also interfered by white blocks of pigment—light leaks—that keep you from fully accessing the image, or seeing the information it is trying to provide. I began to think about these paintings as image bodies; hence the titles *image body 1 and 2*. A body is something that exists physically in the world. A body is responsive to its environment, interacts with stimuli, engages and has relationships

with other things around it, affects and reflects things in its close proximity, it breathes, it moves, and most importantly it is not an isolated unresponsive illusion behind a screen. The descriptors that prelude the titles: “Float, sink” and “Hover, drop” are contradictory actions that cannot possibly occur at the same time. These are motions that can occur to a body existing in real space but if they did occur at the same time the action of floating or sinking would be cancelled out entirely. The body would stay at rest or in a stable position. I am thinking of the work as doing these two contradictory actions—it takes in, contemplates, and embraces the problematic qualities of the contemporary image while also resisting them in an effort to be something completely different.

The conclusion of my research *is* my work. I use my work as a way of taking in the world around me and understanding how and where I fit into it. The work is self-reflective, but also explorative and dissonant from the possibilities of the era I live in. I am trying to examine but also reject the contrived gadgets that have become so normalized within our lives in an effort to provide a vision and catalyst for traditions of making that are getting lost and overwritten by the artificial movements of today.

Images



Image A



Image B



Image C

Works Cited

- Henderson, Lesley, et al. *Milestones Of Science And Technology : Making The Modern World*. Chicago: Independent Publishers Group, 2013. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*. Web. 22 Mar. 2016.
- Lorenz, Renate. *Not Now! Now! Chronopolitics, Art & Research*. Vienna: Sternberg Press, 2014. Print.
- Philipp, Michael and Westheider, Ortrud. *Gerhard Richter: Images of an Era*. New York: Hirmer Publishers, 2011. Print.
- Richardson, Brenda. *Abstraction, Gesture, Ecriture*. Zurich: Alesco AG, 1999. Print.
- Winograd, Morley, and Michael D. Hais. *Millennial Momentum : How A New Generation Is Remaking America*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2011. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*. Web. 25 Mar. 2016.
- Wu, Steven, and Herminia Din. *Digital Heritage And Culture : Strategy And Implementation*. London: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2014. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*. Web. 25 Mar. 2016.