

Notes on Photomontage

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More than just geographical markers, borders are points at which opposing factions meet to contest world views, to beat the hell out of each other in defense of something that they believe makes them different from and thus better than one another: a particular religion, language, ethnicity, political view or claim to territory. In this respect, the physical border – be it a river, mountain, wall or fence – is essentially an expression of difference.

The expression of difference that occurs at the border has an aesthetic correlate in the medium of photomontage.... Significantly, cut-and-paste at this point belongs as much to the historical avant-garde as it does to the domain of the mass media. A life-taking earthquake in India is granted more or less the same amount of space as the pressing issue of whether Britney Spears is a virgin or not. Waterproof mascara is advertised alongside an article on drought. The quick edit. The sharp cut. The isolated fragment. The catchy sound bite. As photomontage loops dialectically between artistic practice and advertising strategy (from Hannah Höch's *Ethnographic Museum* series to Oliviero Toscani's *United Colors of Benetton* campaign and back again), the formal problem that is definitive for the medium remains much the same.... At the border where one element meets a second, mediation between the two becomes necessary. The series of choices that the photomonteur must make as s/he negotiates the interface between two elements is somehow similar to those faced by the translator. Can two

fragments of visual language be reconciled or are they incommensurable? What to do with formal differences, with the shifts in hue, scale and density that mark the transition from one image fragment to the next? The cut between two fragments can be left to fester openly as in the work of John Heartfield or Hans Bellmer, or it can be obscured in various ways, as in Michael Jackson's 1991 music video *Black or White*, in which an endless series of faces – vastly different in color and ethnicity – are seamlessly morphed into each other by means of digital technology.

To morph or not to morph? The Michael Jackson example is an interesting one because it suggests a correlation between the dilemma that defines the practice of photomontage, and the much broader dilemma which is at the core of global capitalism. Here the question – to morph or not to morph? – can be roughly translated to read as follows: is it more lucrative to insist on cultural differences (mining third world cultures for new and exotic trends)... or to aggressively undermine cultural specificity to the ends of creating a universe of 'global citizens' whose affiliation to international consumer culture exceeds any specific sense of national or cultural belonging? In other words, should difference be turned into fashion, or should fashion insist that there is no longer any difference? What to do with linguistic and ethnic differences, the shifts in beliefs, lifestyles and budgets that mark the transition from one consumer market to the next? Small surprise that the marketing and public relations divisions of global capital have time and time again used photomontage to articulate this quandary. The long-running *United Colors of Benetton* campaign, for example, has relied almost entirely on a cut-and-paste aesthetic, producing saturated images of a young Jew with a young Arab, a black woman breast-feeding a

white baby, an American child with a Russian child, etc. Here the shiny hyper-visualization of difference is employed to the ends of promoting consumption and sameness, thus bringing the contradiction full circle. The ingenuity of such ads lies in their ability to spectacularize and commodify the social and cultural differences that they appropriate as their consumer platform, while in the same stroke camouflaging the extent to which global capital works at erasing such differences.

This somehow leads back to the formal quandary that is inherent to photomontage and to the *Rainbow Series* specifically. Leaving the scars that mark the meeting of two contrasting bodies visible and untreated no longer has the shock value or political potential that it might have had in the early days of photomontage. The lack of resolution that characterizes the members of the *Rainbow Series* has perhaps for that reason been read by some as cynical and defeatist. But to remove the jagged borders between the fragments that constitute the images would have falsely concealed the incommensurability that the series of photomontages dramatizes, the aspect that lead one critic to describe the series as "the dark side of *Benetton*." To be fair (as much as I appreciated that particular response to the *Rainbow Series*), *Benetton* has had a good deal of assistance in perpetrating the illusion of global borderlessness. Pseudo-egalitarian institutions like the Olympic Games and the United Nations endlessly re-choreograph the illusion of a world population united in transparent community. That illusion has its own anthem in the dubious philanthropy of U.S.A for Africa's *We Are the World*, and its own much touted communication network in the World Wide Web, which supposedly connects us magically to one another, enabling us to transcend economic and other borders. Now while it

is certainly not the work of artists to respect or maintain borders, neither is it their work to pretend that borders do not exist.

The negotiation of the cut or border between two elements in a photomontage is, as suggested earlier, an act of translation. The question for the translator or photomonteur is whether it is necessary or possible or desirable to translate one element invisibly into the next. More and more, artists must literally become translators of the world, as their work carries them from city to city, such that at a certain point all cities (including one's home city), come to seem foreign. The nomadic movement of many contemporary artists mimics the movement of global capital across international borders. In fact, it seems that there is an almost inevitable chronology: as a country gains global acceptance in economic and/or political terms, artists from that country are increasingly likely to be invited to show their work internationally and may indeed enjoy-suffer a moment of being fashionable within the art world for a season or two (witness the unprecedented fashionability of South African artists in the post-Apartheid moment or the fresh respectability of Russian artists after the dissipation of the Cold War). One way in which artists can resist being reduced to mere shadows of capital is to embrace the act of translating as they move from culture to culture. They can acknowledge the borders that they cross as they do their work, rather than simply assuming, like the grey-suited businessmen alongside whom they commute from country to country, that there are no borders of any sort left, aside from the fact that people eat pasta and wear *Prada* in Italy, as opposed to eating sashimi and wearing *Miyake* in Tokyo. If the work of the global business commuter is to spread the myth of global connectivity, then the work of the artist (who somehow exists in parasitic relationship to the wealth that global capital



creates), is to counter this and similar myths. In this respect, the non-official translations that artists can provide, in whatever form that they might choose to present these translations, might offer alternatives to the stifling language with which global capital maps the world.

This text is excerpted from notes prepared for a talk given at the CapcMusée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux on 16 May, 2001. That lecture was originally developed out of the transcript of a lengthy interview with Rosanne Altstatt, a substantial part of which will appear in the June 2001 issue of Kunst-Bulletin.

BABEL SERIES (1999).

Laute Ikonen: Meinen und Verstehen*

Martin Sturm

Wir kehren an den Rand der Sprache zurück, dort wo alles beginnt, wenn mit einsilbigen Lauten alles gesagt wird, was Bedeutung hat und bedeutsam ist. In *Babel Series* komponiert und installiert Candice Breitz ein stotterndes Konzert der ersten Plapperlaute. In einer Endlosschleife werden auf sieben Fernsehmonitoren, die frei hängend in unterschiedlicher Höhe im Raum verteilt sind, bruchstückhafte Ausschnitte bekannter Musikvideos eingespielt. Ikonen der Popkultur. Unaufhörlich leiern die Stars staccatoartige Wortsilben vor sich her.

Wir nähern uns dem Raum. Madonna, die Medienkönigin, bewegt unaufhörlich ihre Lippen. Wir treten ein. Noisegate. Eine Kakophonie. Reduziert. Hochgradig abstrakt. Vor allem aber: ein Rhythmus, abgehackt und wiederholt, immer wieder. Die Sprache aufgelöst in einer Serie dissonanter Beats. Wahrer Höllenlärm.

Wir blicken uns um. Tageslicht, gefiltert. Gelb. Wunderschöne Bogenfenster. Das blaue Licht des Monitors, schwebend im Raum. Primärfarben. Wo sind wir? Eine Stimmung zwischen sakralem Ort, Tanzsaal und Off-space-Disco.

Wir durchschreiten den Raum, wir bewegen uns und lassen die Blicke schweifen, von Ikone zu Ikone. Madonna, Sting und die