

Radicalizing Refamiliarization

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In this short article, our aim is to consider contemporary American visual culture through a contribution to the question concerning Barack Obama. However, our article is not a work of academic philosophy, art theory, or even a description of the theoretical humanities. Rather, it is a postmodern meditation on the condition of American appropriation art.

Of the many stimulating and demanding subjects that visual theorists and artists have had to struggle with in response to the ascendance of Obama to the 44th Presidency of the United States, is American visual artist Shepard Fairey's iconic Obama 'PROGRESS' and 'HOPE' posters and the Associated Press (AP)'s subsequent declaration of a copyright image war against Fairey. Fairey's posters thus raise the issue of appropriation artists' terms and practices specifically regarding visual art created in the present period that reflects critical conceptions of affect, sensation and the altered standing of the visual artist as appropriator, remediator and maker of images.

Yet, in what follows, we shall not be reacting to the problem of Fairey's Obama posters and their significance for American appropriation art's relationship to copyrighted images per se. Rather, our position shares common ground with all those thinkers and artists discussing and producing visual art today that is theoretically informed by what Drucker (2008) calls 'radical refamiliarization' or 'an associative reading that resituates images within networks and scenes of knowledge' (p. 25). Refamiliarization debates the theoretical significance of appropriated and aestheticized political icons, and involves itself with making a contribution to postmodern artistic, critical and politicized notions of the influence and meaning of radicalization. There are many examples of contemporary appropriation art that function in this way. Particularly relevant with regard to Fairey's posters are two works we shall examine briefly. The first is an iconic portrait of Condoleezza Rice, the former US Secretary of State, painted by the influential Belgian painter Luc Tuymans, whose work articulates an important direction in American and European contemporary art. Tuymans' practice has long involved the appropriation of media photographs and, like Fairey's posters, Tuymans' portrait of Condoleezza Rice is based on a ubiquitous news photograph, and serves as a piquant example of radical refamiliarization.

The other work we will examine is American artist Joy Garnett's 2003 painting 'Stones', which is based on a Reuters photograph taken by Stefano Rellandini in 1991 of a protestor throwing a stone at riot police outside the Aviano Air Base in Vicenza, northern Italy. Garnett, who, like Tuymans and Fairey, routinely appropriates media images as sources for her paintings, has also incurred legal scrutiny and accusations of copyright infringement regarding the source for one of her paintings (see, e.g., Garnett and Meiselas, 2007).

Certainly, Fairey's approach in the case of the Obama posters is important not merely for its appropriation of a particular news photograph and subsequent accusation of copyright infringement by the AP, but primarily because of Fairey's immediate and instrumental transformation of the source

image into a new entity, in keeping with the practice of appropriation employed by other theoretically inflected contemporary artists. In this article, then, we shall argue that we can discover new facets of visual culture through the procedures of radical refamiliarization. Indeed, we shall endeavour to illustrate how images that emerge in the media can be transformed from being images that reinforce it, into works that radicalize our perception of it.

What, then, is the relationship between postmodern American visual culture and Obama? One way to consider this topic is to examine Fairey's appropriated Obama 'PROGRESS' and 'HOPE' posters (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1 Shepard Fairey's Obama 'PROGRESS' poster. Figure 2 Shepard Fairey's Obama 'HOPE' poster.

Fairey issued the first version of his Obama poster (Figure 1), with the word 'PROGRESS', in an initial run of 350. The poster was sold to generate funds for a state-wide poster campaign in support of Obama's presidential campaign. The second, 'HOPE' version (Figure 2), commissioned and officially sanctioned by the Obama team, became the visual lynchpin of a viral marketing strategy that (among other things), served to put the Obama campaign squarely on the map of 21st-century, socially networked culture.

This poster, an elegant piece of agitprop showing a portrait of Obama, his chin tilted slightly upward in an attitude of listening or anticipation, is rendered in red, blue and beige, with the word 'HOPE' emblazoned along its bottom edge. Fairey made the image freely available and it was reproduced in myriad ways, even parodied, and on a variety of surfaces including hats, wall murals, posters, t-shirts, coffee mugs, buttons, flags and stickers.

After eight years of the regime of President George W. Bush, Americans at first seemed too beaten down by their own resignation and cynicism to be moved by the symbols 'PROGRESS' and 'HOPE'. Indeed, how could 'HOPE' be taken

seriously as the tagline of any political campaign, much less a presidential campaign launched by one of the two major parties in the twisted entertainment and advertisement-driven world of American politics? But, in a short time, owing in part to American frustration, and to the Obama campaign's online strategies of grass roots inclusiveness, the poster, the portrait and the message they bore became emblematic of something more than the race to the White House: the reinstatement of the nation's trampled principles, the resurgence of disenfranchised ideals and beliefs suppressed since the time of the civil rights era. Elderly survivors and heroes of that time came out to support the campaign, the election and the most cathartic of presidential inaugurations. A longstanding battle was perceived as won.

In the meantime, the campaign, its medium and its message, extended an ongoing invitation to that potent sector of society, its youth, to participate in the process and stake their claims in a country whose policies, by broad consensus, had gone wildly astray. 'HOPE' was as much about ending the reign of the Bush era geopolitically and metaphysically, as about bringing a hobbled, queasy, nation past the ingrained norms of orchestrated fear, and into a place where intellectual exchange and democratic responsibility might actually be taken seriously.

There can be little doubt that the import of Fairey's Obama posters are connected to the topic of American appropriation art, certainly as far as the AP is concerned. For, in February 2009, the AP issued a statement accusing Fairey of copyright infringement over one of its images, a portrait of the then- Senator Obama at a press conference on Darfur that took place in 2006 (Figure 3).

In this battlefield, issues of property and free expression collide. Mannie Garcia, the news photographer who actually shot the source photograph, came forward stating that he had no desire to sue Fairey and that he was proud that his image had been utilized in this way.



Figure 3 Senator Barack Obama. AP
Photo: Mannie Garcia.

There have also been indications of the AP's bad faith; Garcia questions

their claim that he contractually signed over the copyright of the image to them. Lacking a solid basis for an infringement suit, the AP has resorted to launching a smear campaign against Fairey, portraying him as a 'criminal', a ne'er-do-well street artist and a vandal.

A mere month into Obama's presidency, then, American contemporary visual art and its critical concepts became headline news. But what is the AP's strike emblematic of? A censorious critique of 'open source'-driven internet culture? A futile attempt to maintain corporate control over existing systems of copyright? An ill-advised push to exert some kind of influence over the altered standing of the American visual artist as an appropriator and producer of images? Or is it just a matter of corporate lawyers lining their pockets? Until the Fairey case, of course, the war over intellectual property within the realm of visual culture (as opposed to popular music, for instance) had enjoyed the engagement of a much smaller audience. This, on the other hand, promises, and continues to be, a fascinating, high-profile story. For Fairey has filed a summary judgment against the AP, refuting its accusations and demanding a jury trial. Fairey makes a strong case for fair use, and working for him *pro bono* is the nation's most progressive, forward-thinking team in cyber law, the Stanford Fair Use Project at the Center for Internet and Society, founded by Stanford Professor of Law, critic of existing copyright law, and prolific advocate for 'read-write culture', Lawrence Lessig.

Even so, we do not want to respond literally to the question of Fairey's methods of appropriation and association with copyrighted imagery as such. Instead, our perspective centres on art that is concerned with debating and creating contemporary works that are theoretically driven by Drucker's conception of radical refamiliarization as an associative interpretation that repositions images within information systems and data sites. Discussing the conjectural impact of appropriated and aestheticized political leaders, radicalizing refamiliarization engages with and makes a contribution to contemporary imaginative, investigative and politicized ideas of the effect and connotations of radicalization, and speaks to the altered reputation of the American visual artist as maker of appropriated and refamiliarized images.

Let us first consider Luc Tuymans' 2005 painting, 'The Secretary of State', which is based on a found news photograph of Condoleezza Rice (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Luc Tuymans, 'The Secretary of State', 2005, oil on canvas, 18 x 24¹/₄ inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, fractional and promised gift of David and Monica Zwirner 2006 ©

Tuymans' painting concentrates on Rice's global representation and character, her inexplicable, almost supernatural identity that has been created through countless media images of her as a stunning but simultaneously all too real threat to societies worldwide. Yet we want to propose that we can determine some original components of contemporary visual culture using the methodology of radical refamiliarization. Accordingly, Fairey's Obama posters are significant because of his instant and involved conversion of a foundational image into a novel entity. In brief, we want to assert that the graphic or painterly transformative processes involved in repurposing Obama's and Rice's photographic portraits are significant means by which visual theorists and artists can refamiliarize themselves with the complex cultural mechanisms by which such images are created.

Consider Stefano Rellandini's 1991 Reuters photograph of a protestor flinging a stone at riot police outside the Aviano Air Base in Vicenza, northern Italy (Figure 5), which is the basis for Garnett's 2003 'Stones' painting (Figure 6).

How do protestors participating in demonstrations in opposition to, for instance, NATO's airstrikes on former Yugoslavia and against militarization more broadly, develop into publicly available photographs and wider media discourses? 'Stones' illustrates that the circuits of

Figure 5 Protestor, Aviano, Italy.
Reuters Photo/Stefano Rellandini.



Figure 6 Joy Garnett, 'Stones',
2003, oil on canvas, 60 X 78
inches. Courtesy of the artist and
Winkleman Gallery, New York
City.

political and communal self-reliance, activist networks and conventional media imagery of uprisings can be critically examined. Yet such illustrations are not simply a skirmish with the derisory imagery of the conservative news media and its representational fantasies. Rather, they are battles to rework news media's conditionality, to illustrate that its images are not beyond the experience of existing individual people in extreme states. 'Stones' offers a base for the confrontation between the all-but exhausted debates over reality and representation, truth and trickery. Such suppositions are therefore a departure from modern de-familiarization, from the attempt to demonstrate that the context of Rellandini's photograph is misleading. As an

alternative, 'Stones' adopts a postmodern, radicalized, refamiliarization that reveals the figure, partly through the *erasure* of the contextualizing details in the background of Rellandini's photograph, as having a kind of poetic or ecstatic reality of its own. The undertaking here, then, is to conduct aesthetic investigations, to look for and recuperate from the web images that we are by now inured to. After all, images of protestors tossing stones can be counted as something of an image pandemic in the era of Google and the so-called worldwide War on Terror. In this way, 'Stones' is not purely the outcome of surfing the web for vibrant images that in some way conceal the veracity of protest, but a contribution to alter-globalism and anti-military protests with, as we shall see later, real consequence on the ground.

'Stones', like Tuymans' 'The Secretary of State' and Fairey's Obama posters, offers an immediate entrance into the informational and image-laden cultural explosion detonated primarily by communications technologies founded on a welter of news hyperlinks, informative and not so informative websites, blogged reports, and so forth, all of which incessantly generate our contemporary visual culture. Is 'Stones' not a picture of the radicalization of the body comprised first and foremost of an extremely contorted face? This, then, is the product of the visual regime of the grimace, of the protesting body awry, airborne, as it gets ready to hurl stones. Accentuating the twisted face, cropping closer to the protestor's body than Rellandini's photograph, and erasing the riot police in the background, the painterly engagement of 'Stones' with the figure *in extremis* together with its radicalizing refamiliarization are at once phenomena of extended distortion and removal. But 'Stones' also confirms how such iconic photographic markers can become symbols of identification as protagonists survey their new-found world as figures in a larger cultural scene that works not on the basis of portraits, names, photographs or protestors throwing rocks at the police, but as an abstract emblem of resistance. Concentrating on a seemingly singular person, the instigator of this particular riotous undertaking, 'Stones' reveals him not be an isolated individual but an *intersection*, a junction where a much wider network centred on the radicalization of the protesting body meets a universal subjectivity that is connected to and sustained by alter- iconic and exceedingly visualized present-day events, by an illustrative regime disassociated from a mass media that levels all events to mere 'news'. In 'Stones', the individual element of identity and truth is subsumed to a more lasting, abstract realm, as a news photograph morphs into something more than a simple representation of actual events. Appropriated real events turn out to be a discursive set of global connections, a message field in service to a larger project of creating universal symbols that, despite their at times re- and decontextualized conflicts and mass-mediated destructive energies, in some way radically refamiliarize and disclose both the methods of news photography and painting.

We began this short article with the aim of considering contemporary American visual culture through a contribution to the question concerning Barack Obama and ended it with 'Stones' as an exemplary manifestation of radicalized refamiliarization of the familiar face of the grimace of protest, of 21st-century political discourse and action. And although we discussed Fairey's Obama posters in relation to the issue of American appropriation art, we want to conclude not with a discourse on contemporary visual art but with a number of critical comments that concern the spectacle of the figure of Obama

that, we hope, will resonate with all those who seek to become an emblem of something much larger than themselves.

Following the production of 'Stones', which is part of Garnett's 'Riot' series (all of which remain online under creative commons licences), she received an enthusiastic email from an Italian stranger who called himself 'Metropolitan Researcher', identifying himself as the 'protagonist' of the painting, the real 'Stones' referent. A year later, another email concerning 'Stones' arrived from a friend of Metropolitan Researcher, who corroborated both his identity and his attitude towards being painted, to becoming a picture. As with our own position adopted in this article, he was joyous to think that others were discussing and producing visual art that addresses anti-military impulses, that radically refamiliarizes social activism, conducts associative readings that resituate image narratives within the alter-knowledge networks and scenes of metropolitan researchers. Radically refamiliarizing throwing a stone is now a part of the debate over appropriated and aestheticized political icons. We must, then, involve ourselves with radical accounts of knowledge and visual languages if we are to address both the altered status of the visual artist as producer of appropriated and refamiliarized images and the terror of the copyright image wars.

Fairey's Obama posters, Tuymans' painting of Condoleezza Rice, and Garnett's 'Stones', are all examples of the ways in which we can discover new facets of the image, a radically refamiliarizing approach to appropriation art in the era of the creative commons. Fairey's Obama posters are important because his immediate and instrumental transformation of the source image into a new entity alerts us to the fact that neither ideological image manoeuvrings nor media distortion are out of date. These works all show us that such media images can be changed from being images that strengthen the conventional media, and our own isolation, to images that can not only radicalize our perspective on the media but also bring people together in struggle. They show that this struggle can be given expression, that it can be galvanized and articulated through transformations of single news photographs into artworks that describe and refamiliarize us with, for example, the visage of a terribly powerful woman, or a protestor throwing a stone at riot police, or even a man whose very likeness has come to embody hope.

References

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