THE VIRTUALITIES OF RANDOMNESS

FPA 310
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MONDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2011
“Cutting-up is to reformulate what is problematic, to escape the banality of the esoteric: cut-up the word and cut out the secret” (Moore, 437).

- Nathan Moore

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Although collage and assemblage are practices most commonly associated with visual artists, literature also has a rich tradition of writers who utilize a wide range of found material for the basis of their work. These writers will “sample” from existing texts in order to construct works of non-linear writing. Initially developed by the Dadaists of the 1920s, the cut-up technique is an experimental writing practice that was popularized by Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs during the beat era of the 1950s. For my final project, *The Saturday Times*, I initiated an interactive cut-up work that developed through my interactions over a 24-hour period of time. By exploring French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze’s theory of the actual and the virtual, I will consider how a work produced through the cut-up method may increase the density of virtuals surrounding a work, leaving it open to a wider range of potential perceptions. I believe that by examining this piece using Charles Sanders Pierce’s semiotic model of the Sign, I can gain a better understanding of how a mash-up of seemingly nonsensical words can open the doors for viewers to an unlimited realm of virtualities.

The cut-up technique is a practice that grew out of the experimental foundation laid by 1920’s dada. In an effort to question and undermine the popular, more traditional
values in art making, many artists from the dada movement would willfully indulge the unknown and allow for the unpredictability of chance to determine much of their works’ outcome. An early example of this can be seen in 1920, when Romanian-born essayist and poet, Tristan Tzara improvised a poem by randomly drawing words from a hat (Burroughs, 31). Many years later, in the summer of 1959, beat writers Brion Gysin and William Burroughs popularized the cut-up method after Gysin stumbled upon the technique when he accidentally cut through a pile of old newspapers (Burroughs, 31). By rearranging the random sections of paper, he managed to produce new and interesting prose from the unexpected juxtapositions of words, phrases and images.

In my final project, “The Saturday Times”, I created a cut-up text by asking for the participation of those people I encountered over a period of 24-hours. I provided them with the Saturday edition of The New York Times as their initial text and asked them to build upon the work by selecting, cutting-out, and rearranging words, phrases or images from the paper that were significant or meaningful to them. By using this experimental methodology, I limited my creative control over the work and in doing so, allowed the participants themselves to expand on the material that had already been placed. With each new interaction, the work became further abstracted, therefore allowing more room for unintended and unforeseeable content and development.

Charles Sanders Peirce suggests that everything in the world is a Sign and that we extract meaning from the world using such signs – signs here referring to “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (Peirce, Ground, Object and Interpretant). His approach to semiotics is a research method that describes a Sign in terms of its Object, Representamen and Interpretant. For Peirce, the Object is something that is represented by a Sign - it is the object of study. The Representamen,
on the other hand, is something that denotes the Object - the Sign created by an individual. The Interpretant then being the new Sign that is created in a viewer’s mind by both the Object and Representamen. (Peirce, Ground, Object and Interpretant)

In relation to my work, this method suggests that each word on the page exists as its own Sign in the world, with each of these Signs speaking to a particular Object. While every word functions as a Sign in itself, grouped together in a sentence, these words signify something entirely different. With each grouping, a new series of signs are created which refer to a completely different set of objects and understanding. By cutting up a cohesive text and rearranging the words to form alternate, abstract phrases, not only do these new sentences also function as a sign for the viewer, but with every word that’s added, the work as a whole shifts and signifies something different each time.

If, as philosopher Gilles Deleuze believes, the virtual contains everything in the world, including both the possible and the impossible, then naturally, every image, letter, word or phrase can be included in this category. Similarly, when a participant selects and places their word or phrase on the page, their gesture too, is a virtual actualized. How a participant chooses to frame their cut-outs within the work does not limit its potential interpretations to just one reading. Deleuze argues that “purely actual objects do not exist” and that in fact, “every actual surrounds itself with a cloud of virtual images” (Deleuze, 148). This indicates that although every perception of a word or image is an actualization of a virtual, there still remains an expansive area of concentric virtual circles that surround each actual object. Ultimately what distinguishes the actual from the virtual is the passing of time. The actual is the present moment, “the completement or the product” (Deleuze, 149) and is so defined by this passage of time. The virtual, on the other hand, contains every bit of time that has gone by and everything that has ever
happened, including alternate potentials. And so, due to the seemingly arbitrary and unexpected arrangements of text and image, the viewers’ potential perceptions of the work is left to hover in an infinite realm of possibilities.

Although viewers’ perceptions are already loaded with an inordinate amount of virtual images, with every addition to the work, regardless of how subtle, not only does the word become a new sign, but so does the sentence in which it is placed, as well as the work as a whole. This, in turn, increases the layers of virtual images in the work. Every different cut-up and arrangement a participant makes creates a new set of Representamen (or signs). This then generates a new Interpretant for not only them, but for the next participant/viewer as well, continuing on until the 24 hours is complete.

This interactive process truly highlights the flexibility of words as Signs. Regardless of the fact that signs as a rule are not fixed and will often vary from person to person, “the practice of cutting-up, the exposure to both the product and the process of this technique, aims to remind the cutter-reader (because reading is also inevitably a process of cutting up) that the word is not what it seems” (Moore, 437). The constant cut-ups encourage the cyclical nature of Sign creation and with each new arrangement of text, the work’s intensity of virtualities increases. The new potential that each word then holds is intensified as a single unit, with its virtual tentacles extending to not only its immediate neighbour, but throughout the entire document and viewer.

WORKS CITED


The new disciplinary rules may help ensure that there will not be another threat of a major federal crackdown.

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