A field (of interconnected realities): cyber drawing and mash-up electronic goodness

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Abstract: In this paper we discuss the reenactment of the artist's book *A week of goodness* (1934) for a pubic art commission – Living room 10 in Auckland city centre– titled *A field (of interconnected realities)(2010)*. We analyse the surrealist collage novel that explored the unconscious in a series of traumatic tableaux and its translation from the physical to the virtual codex. This performative reading of the book is presented at two voices to reflect the dual collaborative process that occurred both in research and in the practice of split screen video stream collage.

[paula roush]

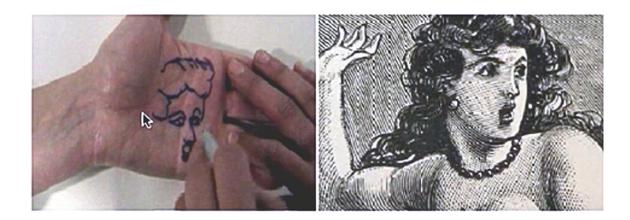## 1. The traditional western codex

In 1934 Max Ernst published the artist's book *Une semaine de bonté ou Les sept elements capitaux* (*A week of goodness or The seven deadly elements*), the third in a series of collage novels, where he developed a new working methodology. This was characterised by the sampling of 19th century mass-produced iconographic sources, mostly found in used book stores and including scientific publications and popular romances, and old commercial catalogues of goods and fashions. The technique of inserting cut up fragments into backgrounds of domestic interiors and other everyday scenes is a collage practice that Annateresa Fabris describes as the "interference in a global image, which changes its original meaning by the inclusion of elements from other contexts." (Fabris, 2010:1)

The term 'collage novel' describes a type of artist's book that combines collage with a narrative flow and *A week of goodness* relies on a serial structure (intended as seven separate volumes that were finally reduced to five) to tell its story. The collages are grouped thematically, each theme corresponding to a separate day of the week and an element. The layout, using two collages per spread, multiplies the impact of the hybrid figures, between the human, the animal and the monster. It also amplifies the ambience of the hybrid spaces, where familiar and threatening domestic interiors crystallise modern subjectivity. Siegfried Giedion considers the work a commentary on the rise of the industrial press and the way rampant mass production and multiplication of images affected the psychic (Giedion, 1978: 370-372). Hal Foster attributes the significance of this collage novel to an "implicit mise-en-scène of the unconscious." The outmoded images were deployed "in the register of the uncanny, as once familiar representations made strange by modern repression." (Foster, 1993: 176). They are seen as a critique to the bourgeois domesticity and the psychopathology of everyday life analysed by Freud in his psychoanalytical theory of childhood sexuality.

2. Windows and edges: life on the computer screen

Our work with webcam-split-screen collage embodies contemporary networked subjectivity, similarly to the way Ernst's collages carried Freud's theory of the unconscious. This is based on Sherry Turkle's suggestion that "life on the computer screen carries theory," by which she means the theory of the decentred

self. "The windows have become a potent metaphor for thinking about the self as a multiple, distributed "time-sharing" system…the life practice of windows is of a distributed self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time." (Turkle, 2004: 103)
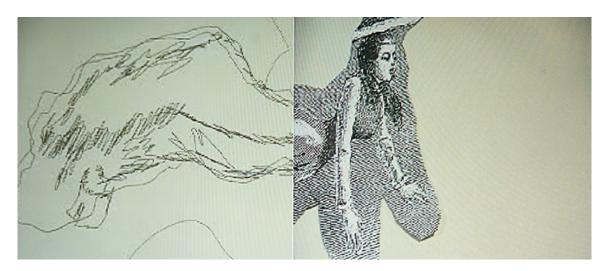

A field (of interconnected realities), 2010, paula roush and maria lusitano, artist's book, double-window video stream, dimensions variable.

Theories of contemporary collage also support this perspective. Ian Monroe analyses the various edges that exist in the material world and the way collage is used to address the nature of difference and being. He describes collage as "a methodology that deploys this edge, this elemental difference between materials, objects, images and subjects as its core concern. It is this active boundary, where previously disassociated material is amalgamated, that gives collage its frisson, its efficacy as a technique." (Monroe, 2008: 32)

And what are the edges in our collage? We can infer that for Ernst these are psychological-biological edges, between the conscious and unconscious, the domestic interior and exterior, the human and animal. This play resulted in the corruption of boundaries and the creation of anxiety about hybrid identities. We can as well locate the edges of our collage in between two computer windows, two countries, two subjectivities, two collaborators, the artists-producers and the audience, the space of the codex and the electronic space, the drawing and the cut-and-paste, the video stream and the still image. Practicing collage in split-screen mode, we were confronted with the edges where different types of transformations happened, due to the collision of two images, two bodies, and more crucially two different selves and subjectivities "glued" across time and space.

3. Performative reading of the book

A field (of interconnected realities), 2010, paula roush and maria lusitano, artist's book, double-window video stream, dimensions variable.

Much of my personal involvement with this project derives from my awareness of this 1934 edition being a pioneering work in the ontology of the artist's book. Departing from its materiality as a paper printed and bound western codex specimen, we reenacted it developing our idyossincratic form of collaborative drawing, collage and webcams in double video-stream windows. That made me recall the observations of Joanna Drucker in *The Virtual Codex from Page Space to E-space*, as she points to the fact that whilst there is still a tendency to separate the experience of reading the traditional codex from the experience of the electronic book, the two experiences are in fact very close. The codex – like the electronic space of the ebook – also contains a virtual space that is actualised through the dynamic relations that arise from its reading.

Further, instead of making a reading of the book based on the iconography of the codex, it might be more productive to think of "the book as a performative space for the production of reading," and "the dramatic potential of the page as a play of action." (Drucker, 2003) Similarly, our performative reading of the book, was determined by our determination to follow the daily structure of the week as a script around which to program our collaboration online and offline, explore the unconscious and open the book for the proximal audience that participated in the project in Auckland.

4. Reenactment as a contemporary art strategy

The increasing amount of reenactments in contemporary art and media practice, speaks to me about the willingness of the works of art to have an after life. Thing theory can be useful here to help me look at the after life of book works. If the artwork has an after life, how can we approach this after-life in *A Week of Goodness*? Andre Lepecki suggested in No Performance's Land that this after-

life is the "affirming power of a will of a thing called the work of art to return, actualising itself as something distinct from what it had already been in the past." (Lepecki, 2011)

It has been attempted before, to depart from Max Ernst 's approach to collage to characterise contemporary art practice, identified with artists' re-use of the past. Arthur C. Danto debates the shift from the modern to the post-modern and contemporary, based on the definition of collage provided by Max Ernst as "the meeting of two distant realities on a plane foreign to them both," (Ernst, 1968) with a difference: "The difference is that there is no longer a plane foreign to distinct artistic realities, nor are those realities all that distant from one another." (Danto, 1977: 5)

This condition where art history and the museum are a field for contemporary artists to work with, in varying degrees of appropriation and reenactment is particularly relevant for our project. The title for the reenactment, 'a Field (of interconnected realities)' is a hint to our methodologies of translation, recreation and repetition in relation to two aspects of this return. Firstly, the introduction of our bodies on camera, in drawing, and visibly integrated in the new networked collage; secondly, in the rearchiving of *A week of goodness* in an expanded field of production that treats "the historical material as a potential waiting to be actualized, however partially and fleetingly." (Lütticken, 2010)

[maria lusitano]

For the project: *A field (of interconnected realities)*, I was in Malmö, Sweden, and Paula in London. We were connected and collaborated through the software Tokbox that allows users to make video calls, through two video chat windows that have the same size and can be put into full screen. It was like our virtual "phoned home" happening between the scenarios of two apartments. One could say that our interconnected computers were our contemporary version of the Victorian drawing room, so prevalent in *A Week Of Goodness*. While on tokbox, we researched the net together, looking for images that could be contemporary updates of the ones used by Marx Ernst.

One set of such images is of body scans due to its relationship to the uncanny. *A Week Of Goodness* displays the uncanny in the bourgeois household, that feeling of unease, fear and strangeness, expressed in a familiar place such as our home, as described by Freud in his essay *The Uncanny* (Freud, 1919). What is the uncanny to us today and how is it connected to the domestic space? Expanding the notion of home to our bodies, one can see the skin as the wall of a house that is one's body. Inside are the human organs, invisible to sight. And what threatens our most intimate home, our body? The body is progressively becoming ultra visible, due to an increasingly regular

attitude of surveying it by CT scan and ultra sound scans. This type of imagery both protects and anticipates disaster. It reminded us of our immanence. The uncanny has become our own voluntarily surveilled body.

Another set is of war images. Max Ernst fought in World War I, and that experience had been highly traumatic. As western female artists, we had a quite different relationship to war imagery, characterized by a long history of mediatisation that dispossessed them of content. As Sontag said in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, "images of pain, horror, and atrocity don't mean much to the ones who have not lived through such things and can't understand, can't imagine the experiences such images represent." (Sontag, 2003:26) What came to represent war to us in this project, were images produced with conflict simulation software, as well as images of war robots, designed to help the army in terrestrial operations.

In our project, these anthropomorphic images, acquired an additional function as they also referred to the hybrid human/animal characters, present in the original book. Those have been interpreted by Fabris as the representation of "the monstrous" located "in the core of the bourgeois society, as its constitutive element" (Fabris, 2010: 172). This fact is now widely known. In 1963, Hanna Arendt wrote about this in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. This book described how unthinkable acts became acceptable because they constituted "just the way things are". I believe though, that in our project, our hybrid figures lost their threat and monstrosity. When, through drawing, we assembled some of Ernst's original figures with others of our archive, such as robots and animals, we produced new hybrid characters such as transgender figures and cyborgs that to my eyes, looked very pleasant.

At the final stage of our project, I was still in Malmö, and Paula was in Auckland. In collaboration with the public, we wanted now to make five performances that would transform each volume of the original book into networked drawings that would take shape in the split window of the tokbox screen.

Our performances consisted of making live drawings and collages on paper with pens, pencils, sketch-a-graph and paint, while connected through webcams. Sometimes I drew with Paula, others, with the public. With the camera we alternated between filming either the paper or the computer screen to which each drawing/collage was being streamed back, becoming in this way visible to both of us. When filming the screen, we filmed the other's tokbox window, and each half drawing was in this way mirrored and merged. Through this process our new drawings/collages gained a moving dimension, becoming film collages.

Looking today at this project and its archives, I realise how from its beginning, we were immersed in a strange and compulsive urge to record, photograph and save every single image produced. Navigating through the accumulated material, one wandered if that was the real unconscious anxiety of this project. How to deal with such an uncanny expanding archive? In *Compulsive Beauty*, Foster reflects upon the surrealist relationship between anxiety and the uncanny

mentioning how "the first is one effect of the second (Foster, 1993: 193)." He connects the uncanny to "aura", a concept developed by Benjamin and that Foster describes as "the empathic moment of human connection to material things" (ibid: 195), mentioning Benjamin's description of the image of a hand that "traces a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer" (Benjamin, 1934:518).

This sounded familiar to what I felt, when drawing over the lines of Ernst's flying woman with one hand while filming with the other. Or when I filmed the screen, where I could see Paula's collage taking shape step by step and merging with my own window, in our common virtual canvas. Although it was pleasurable, it was also a fleeting moment that provoked concern. This brings me to another of Foster's ideas concerning the surrealists' project, reflecting on their attempts of restaging two fantasies: "one of maternal plenitude, of a space-time of bodily intimacy and psychic unity before any separation or loss, and another of paternal punishment, of the trauma of such separation or loss" (ibid: 193). For us, two female artists working in a virtual one space-time screened body, it felt like restaging the first part of these fantasies, whilst avoiding the second.

We were not the first ones to avoid the trauma of separation and loss. In 1956, a friend of Ernst, Valentine Penrose, did her own project of collage novel as a response to Ernst's book. It was entitled *Dons des Feminines* and it was a critique of the surrealists' representation of women and the female form. Penrose's collages expressed no violence, and curiously lacked the male figure. In her book, Penrose told the story of the travels and erotic adventures of two women through 26 collages. This narrative, according to Humphrey was a conscious break with "patriarchal hegemony"(Humphrey, 2007:378). It recreated a new forest of symbols that spoke to us "with understanding eyes," and I quote here Baudelaire's poem Correspondences (Aggeler: 1954). Sixty years later, a book that has gained life once again again, just like Valentine Penrose recreating a new Baudelairian forest of symbols, inspired us. It is this forest of drawings, these collages, that are looking at you and that I would like to invite you into trying to decipher.

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