Inscribing the Social Body: Economies of image/text in the public domain

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Introducing the social body

> The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration (Foucault, 1984b, p. 83).
>
> Can this becoming, this emergence, be called Art? That would make the territory a result of art (Deleuze & Guattari, 1993, p. 316).

The question of the body and its social and political emplacements has been a significant site of investigation and analysis by 20th century philosophers, artists and writers. For example, familiar sites of focus include the body as a process of civilising forces, the body beautiful in commercial enterprise, the grotesque body in carnivalesque and dis-ease, the gaze in gender politics, the docile body in societal relations of power, the body politic, the body as gendered, racial and experiential site of knowledge, the medicalised body, the deterritorialised body as machine or set of vibrations, the body as an epistemological and ontological site, the social body.

This discussion focuses on the "social body" and the economies of image and text in the public domain. How might the social body be inscribed, constructed, understood? The idea of the social body suggests an embodied social life coming from the implicit regulating practices of social authority. Such practices can be identified through the distribution and reception of modes of representation and communication, and the rhetorical figure of the body in the production of social argument. For example, investigating the representation of the population as an aggregate of attitudes and unspoken rules, Mary Poovey (1995) examines the novel as a site of exposure of social regulations, putting forward the argument that literature and social reform represent the broad concerns of place and time in Victorian England. Poovey investigates the making of the social body in the following ways: the distribution of social authority, the formalisation of knowledge through institutional practices, and the subsequent defining of the normative mores of society.

A social body is thus a cultural formation or an aggregate of formations that give a particular character to a time or place. For example we could speak of a global social body, or colonial social body, a domesticated social body, a corporatised social

body, or a psychosocial space of incorporation as a social body. These groups represent aggregated conditions of specific social and cultural processes through which knowledge and power is organised.

In this article I am focusing on the aesthetic domain in public spaces, and the ways image and text can act as forms of inscription. Through examining billboards and advertising images I am seeking to determine how the practices of images affect, represent or reflect a social structure. Such a structure can be otherwise known as a social body, with interdependent domains of cultural, economic and political histories and interests. My focus is on the process and power of images as signs of embodied knowledge through which the social body is constructed and through which we become beings in the social world. Ultimately we might ask what sort of social body is emerging and what sort of beings we are becoming in the image-saturated, global world of the 21st century.

The discussion draws from a research project I undertook in Auckland, New Zealand, involving an empirical and philosophical study of the visual signs and significations of billboards in the city centre.[1] The research data was collected one day in May, 2000, and subsequently presented at an international conference, *Globalization, Culture and Everyday Life*, organized by the Research Unit for Global Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK.

One Day in May

> Under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power… (Foucault, 1991, p. 217).

It was a warm autumn Saturday in May. The research event involved taking the camera and our subjective vision to document a sample of billboards in city streets in order to determine dominant and marginalised forms of address in public places, as we questioned how cultural identity makes itself visible and how the "social body" articulates itself. The arbitrary rules indicated that the billboards would be large, prominently displayed and situated within one-kilometer radius of the city centre. The data would be captured photographically and placed under the critical analyst's searching gaze, bringing to the visual syntax certain criteria of judgement about networks of meaning relating to 'the global' and 'the local' in order to determine who was speaking for whom, in what language and through what appeal.

In the initial stages of the research what was the over-riding impression? It was one of an overt and homogenous appeal to freedom, freedom to own, to dress, to drink, to travel, to tick off the list of been-there, done-that, and to move on to more freedom to own, to travel, to tick off the list, to be *on* the list… In other words freedom to consume the *idea* of freedom, thus evoking Susan Sontag's prophetic statement, "Social change is replaced by a change in images. The freedom to consume a plurality of images and goods is equated with freedom itself" (1978, pp. 178-179).

There was careful recording of specific images, locations, design, linguistic and visual signifiers, noting the level at which the images proclaim their hyper-real potentials to the city's passing throng of motorists, workers, shoppers, and a transit tourist populace. A common culture of readers, gender-less, race-less, history-less, age-less, would be activated as a social body by what Foucault (1991, p. 217) calls an "abstraction of exchange" in a "panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism" (p. 217). Thus Foucault is addressing the make up of the "social body" as something that is already implicated by the workings of power as a productive force in the socio-historical world.

The point of the research, in May 2000, was to identify in what ways images themselves contribute to this process, and how intersecting gazes become a technique of subjective and social production. The act of seeing and reading visual images and texts is activating a process of becoming. This same process can be witnessed in the architecture of reality television shows, such as Big Brother, when viewers are implicitly embodied in the technologies of exchange. As the gaze becomes normalised there exists a reification of the relations of power obfuscating the power dynamics at play as the viewer and reality show participants become as one.

Theories of the Image

The basis of the 2000 project was the consideration and analysis of the practices of image making, placement and reception, noting the way images, juxtaposed with text, have an effect on the formations of identity comprising the social body. In "The Rhetoric of the Image" (1977) Roland Barthes posits that,

> general opinion … has a vague conception of the image as an area of resistance to meaning — this in the name of a certain mythical idea of Life: the image is re-presentation … felt to be weak in respect of meaning … There are those who think that the image is an extremely rudimentary system in comparison with

> language and those who think that signification cannot exhaust the image's ineffable richness (Barthes 1977, in Evans & Hall, 1999, p. 33).

Barthes starts his discussion with an etymology of the word, *image*, linking it to the root *imitari*. "Thus we find ourselves immediately at the heart of the most important problem facing the semiology of images: can analogical representation (the 'copy') produce true systems of signs not merely simple agglutinations of symbols?" (p. 33). An agreed assumption among cultural theorists today affirms the significance of image saturation in contemporary culture. As there are complex variations in the ontology of signifying processes, Barthes asks, "How does meaning get into the image?" (p. 33). Then, to unravel the answers to this question, Barthes proposes a study of the communicative strategies of the advertising image.

Barthes makes the point that,

> the signification of the image is undoubtedly intentional; the signified of the advertising message are formed *a priori* by certain attributes of the product and these signifieds have to be transmitted as clearly as possible … the advertising image is *frank*, or at least emphatic (Barthes, in Evans & Hall, 1999, pp. 33-34).

To capture an analysis of the social body, in 2000, the communicative strategies of advertising were fundamentally important. Barthes' 1977 analysis of a *Panzani* advertisement drew attention to linguistic and visual signs and codes, the "natural disposition of the scene", and the discontinuities, which assume a common cultural knowledge for sense determination by the reader. The coded nature of images is read for all its discontinuities and variabilities that characterise the appeal to global readers. In the largest possible format, and in the most conspicuous city sites, on billboards as in cyberspace, images compete for attention and easy reading appealing to a common cultural knowledge for aggregated readers in undetermined spaces.

Benetton and the globalised social body

Giroux's (1994) study of the advertising campaign adopted by the Italian fashion empire, Luciano Benetton, from mid-1980s to mid-1990s, evinced the process whereby business interests insert their commercial strategies or political purposes into the everyday world of public life. In the early 1990s, *United Colors of Benetton* soon became a recurring trademark, multiplying globally in 1991 through the publication of socially political images, as close as you can get to poignant issues of birth, death, disease, entrapment and violence, specifically

gendered and ethnically explicit. Emulating the tactics of artists' billboards, the company "attempted to reinscribe its image within a broader set of political and cultural concerns" (Giroux, 1994, pp. 188-189), although they were often accused of either neutralising racist and problematic inequalities, or sensationalising the worst of humanity's public terrorist acts and private pain.

A multi-sited Benetton billboard featured a black breast in the process of feeding a white baby, with the name *Benetton* discretely displayed. A passing motorist could be forgiven for engaging a momentary identification of idealist frameworks evoked by the physicality of cross-ethnic nurturing. The intentional message came through the use of highly personalised and artistically presented photographs of variously coloured, multicultural subjects, "compelling images that created a provocative effect", as Giroux put it, and moving to more hard-hitting images in 1992, that were "highly charged, photojournalistic images referencing, among other things, the AIDS crisis, environmental disaster, political violence, war, exile, and natural catastrophe" (Giroux, 1994, p. 188), and accompanied always by the Benetton logo. In this sense they were like Magnum photographs of seemingly real life action, crossing the boundaries of public and private, poignancy and pain, but used here for the purpose of drawing attention to a globally ubiquitous market brand.

Billboard and screen artists in public spaces

While readers or viewers can relate to advertising images as a representational site operating between literal and symbolic messages, is there a different process going on when the billboard is a production in the name of 'art'? Deleuze and Guattari draw attention to art works as "territory" or "property", noting that the artist was first to set out the boundary marks, thus claiming the space, and concluding that art is "fundamentally *poster*, *placard*" (1993, p. 316).

In the economy of public images, locating the specific logic of artists' work displayed on *poster* or *placard* sites, equivalent to billboards or media screens in public spaces, opens the way to examine the conditions of artistic production, distribution and consumption that have been adopted and adapted by political, corporate, commercial and personal bodies. In the world of art it is common practice for art-billboards to engage historical, social or political concerns, either through subversion, irony or deconstruction of image and text. Artists seek to intervene, question, draw attention, comment, respond. Such strategies became prevalent in the post-1990s when there was a rethinking of art and social responsibility, and art was becoming more engaged in social and political issues for local communities as for the planet (see Becker, 1994, p. xvii). Billboard and screen artists, or artists whose visual practices

are sited on billboards or media screens in public spaces, tend to “address social issues that have held the attention of the artistic community at certain times … [they] find cracks in the monolith of advertising and corporate culture in which to insert dissent” (Heon, 1999, p. 9).

Through these practices billboards and media screens have the capacity to intervene in identity formations of the social body. Artists like Jenny Holzer[2] or Barbara Kruger,[3] whose art-political messages reached into public spaces normally the habitus of commercial advertising, are by now well documented in terms of their political and aesthetic strategies. Kruger’s twenty years or more of billboards and screened photo images called on the politicising of seemingly innocuous systems of knowledge and identity formations, such as drawing attention to commodity fetishism, with *I Shop Therefore I Am*, or political works such as *In Space No One can Hear You Scream* (Whitney Biennale, 1987). In *Twelve* at Australia Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (ACCA, 2005-2006), a large scale video installation of projected performers and continuously scrolling text takes Kruger’s work from external billboards to internal media screens, which “suggest the thoughts and words of the people involved who tackle the issues of global politics and prejudice” (ACCA, 2005).

It was Kruger who once said, “Power and its politics and hierarchies exist everywhere: in every conversation we have, in every deal we close, in every face we kiss” (Kruger, 2005). Kruger’s iconic images, which have been seen on billboards, bus tickets, t-shirts, posters, placards and screens, address this power and the way it “choreographs the issues of violence and control, of wealth and poverty, of hope and abjection” (2005). Works such as *Your Body is a Battleground* (Kruger, 1989) and *Your Comfort is my Silence* (1981) intervene in metanarrative discourses of the social body to bring the workings of power and gender politics to the fore. Incorporating theories and practices of design, minimizing colouration to black, white and red, juxtaposing an economy of image and text in seemingly serendipitous ways, using popular culture as both subject (content) and tool (technique), maximizing immediacy of reception through the use of photographic imagery, all contribute to the power of Kruger’s work. Thus as much as an undermining and engagement with political issues of the social body, there is also the intervening and exposure of dominant practices of media advertising in the economies of fashion and consumer culture, and a sharp critique of the values they propagate and uphold in the social body.

The billboard and screen images and text of Kruger and Holzer evoke the idea of image as commodity fetish, available for public consumption through their very presence, in a public domain. Kruger states, “I work with pictures and words because they have the ability to determine who we are and who

we aren't" (Kruger, 2005). Similarly, Jenny Holzer intervened with sharp critique in the public domain. Holzer focused on the production and display of truisms that would be quickly read and comprehended. Posters pasted over billboards, LED displays and large-scale projections of text on public facades in urban and landscape settings became synonymous with her work. Joseph Kosuth was another who posted textual statements on billboards in the 1980s. Calling on the idea of Sigmund Freud, his interventions about art and language intervened in the meta-discourses of Western culture and the ways dominant narratives are established and reproduced.

The billboards of Felix Gonzales-Torres questioned the separation of public and private spheres. "Onto the clean, apparently neutral veneer of his essential forms, he adds complex life issues relating to gender, sexuality, love and mortality" (Amanda Cruz cited in Wäspe, 1997, p. 19). For Gonzales-Torres the contextual references of these "complex life issues" start with the specific of his own life. "In 1991 a photo of an unmade but snow-white bed appeared on giant billboards in the Museum of Modern Art and 24 other locations in New York (ill. p. 65, cat. no.184). The bed was empty. But the imprints clearly visible in both pillows made it evident that two people must have slept in it. The photograph shows the bed that Felix Gonzales-Torres slept with his friend Ross. The artist had thus transferred something utterly private into a public space" (Wäspe, 1997, p. 18). Embedded in the private there is an appeal to general spheres of undetermined readers in the social body of public spaces.

Final comment

As old orders of Newtonian space give way to new abstractions of space through digitised systems of knowledge, there is a call for the epistemological and ontological social body to be rethought in terms of place (see Casey, 1997).[4] New spatial dimensions of digital knowledge via new media networks and convergence deterritorialise and reorganise previously held assumptions of embodied practices. The power of surveillance dwells on and in the ubiquitous global architectonics of space, place, and hapless idealisms, which are continually spewed from the ground of the forgetful past to infiltrate even the most utopian of virtual futures.

This article set out to investigate the aesthetic domain of image and text on billboards and media screens in public spaces, and the ways image and text act as forms of inscription. Of interest was the ways the practices of images affect, represent, reflect or even determine a social structure. Through discussing theories of the image through Roland Barthes, analysing media campaigns such as Benetton, addressing the work of billboard artists in public spheres, and finally considering new spatial dimensions, the discussion has shown how

the economies of image and text can act as something more than a mode of representation. Through engaging the interdependent domains of cultural, economic and political histories and interests, the juxtapositions of image and text can act as powerful economies of inscription through which the social body is constructed and through which we become beings in the social world.

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Notes

1 The research was undertaken by Elizabeth Grierson as lead investigator and Nicholas Gresson as photographer.

2 “Holzer began working as an artist in the late 1970s by pasting up printed sheets of paper on city walls, amid the glut of urban advertising. Since then her work has expanded: coffee cups, baseball hats, pencils, golf balls, T-shirts, and digitally programmed signage are some of her chosen formats, which also include the more somber, permanent locations such as bronze plaques and stone benches” (Wye, 1996, p. 15).

3 “Kruger has a background in graphic design and magazine work, and her strategy echoes other mass-media tactics as well: her art has a signature look that is recognizable as a corporate logo. Appropriating black and white photographic images from a wide variety of sources, she superimposes lines of text on them in red and white. Slick and eye-catching, her work speaks the language of advertising, and seems totally at home on billboards, T-shirts, shopping bags, and other ephemeral objects” (Wye, 1996, p. 15).

4 For a thorough investigation and analysis of place and space throughout the discourses of Western culture refer to Casey (1997) *The Fate of Place*.