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In this particular volume the issue of art as interference and the strategies that it should adopt have been reframed within the structures of contemporary technology as well as within the frameworks of interactions between art, science and media. What sort of interference should be chosen, if one at all, remains a personal choice for each artist, curator, critic and historian.

INTERFERENCE STRATEGIES

Gesture in Search of a Purpose

A PREHISTORY OF

MOBILITY

by

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NEW MEDIA ART AS NEW MEDIA CREATIVITY?

The image seems innocuous enough: Ireland's Ronnie Delany stands over a fallen John Landy at the dramatic conclusion of the 1500 metre final in Melbourne in 1956. An iconic expression of the Olympic spirit, the image captures the wrenching disappointment as the gutted favourite is consoled by an unlikely victor. ¹ With Roland Barthes in mind, the image's studium is straightforward: sport photojournalism witnessing a moment of completion, the realisation of the promise of a winner and a loser. The detail that punctuates and disrupts this generic effect, its punctum, is literally a distraction from the central detail, as you need to stray into the crowd observing the scene for it to find you, for it to exert its effect. ² The punctum here is a sensation of the uncanny, an anachronistic impossibility. It is uncanny because it seems to represent the image of a man apparently talking on a mobile phone at a time when television had only just been introduced into Australia, and selectively at that. It is also anachronistic since international direct dialling was still two decades away.

This image is part of a Melbourne Olympic Games memorabilia display at the eponymous Olympic Hotel

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the uncanny anticipation of mobile telephony in the history of the visual image. Drawing on our remix project, The Secret Gestural Prehistory of Mobile Devices, it critically engages with contemporary media culture's obsession with the occupation of the hands as an unwitting gesture in search of a purpose. This gesture is a bodily pantomime imagining an indispensable, intimate apparel that has modified the body's relation to itself and remote others through mobile media. These images are suggestive of bodily rhythms that synchronize the hand, the ear, the eye and the mouth that have not always made sense. In this they foreshadow the potential media that will, in time, resolve this postural ergonomics into a meaningful function: the immediate and continuous communion with unseen and absent others. The visual archive can become the unconscious of contemporary media when its images are re-coded through the writing of implicit and anachronistic narratives. The combination of image and text, in the form of captions, denotes and detonates at one and the same time, creating a double vision that, once seen, can never be unseen.

in Preston, a northern suburb of Melbourne. The hotel was built in 1956 specifically for the occasion of the Olympic Games, along with much of the cheap, social housing around it. The notion of a specific occasion that is historically marked, ordained and commemorated in the physicality of a building is fitting in relation to the phantom image we encountered there on that day in 2010. In itself the image, while a curiosity, doesn't amount to much. It has the same sense of weird, otherworldly novelty of Italian exploitation film

Mondo Cane (1962), or the interstellar traces of astronauts glimpsed in Inca rock carvings and the flight paths for extra-terrestrials on the Nazca plane in Peru featured in Erich von Däniken's book *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968). And as well the more bucolic, though still purportedly otherworldly manifestation of crop circles in a Wiltshire barley field or images of Christ or the Madonna in vegemite toast or a Big Mac from Mexico City.

In the genre of critical remix, however, the found object is certainly not enough, no matter how compellingly 'other' it is. An act of counter-denotation is required to alter the morphology of the image, to translate it into something else, something it was never intended to be, nor could have ever been, but can nonetheless become. It can become perhaps another version of itself, though not a fractal replication of self-similarity, but rather variation within a finite set. When the image is altered by an act of *detonation* it can become a different iteration of itself. Under such circumstances it is always already an image of someone using a mobile phone. Like anagrams, which generate lexical variation within a finite set, linguistic denotation must also, and at the same time, be a detonation, an explosive reprogramming of the image's semiotic DNA (fittingly one term is an anagram of the other). This is what we set out to do with the *Secret Gestural Prehistory of Mobile Devices*. If the initial image was found by accident, we wanted to reproduce this happenstance by actively seeking out other images like the one found at the Olympic Hotel. This meant trawling through back issues of *National Geographic* and *Time/Life* books, old newspapers and encyclopaedias. As other images were found we set about re-coding them through the practice of one of the simplest genres of writing, the caption, which would accompany each image.

MORPHOLOGY

How then to repeatedly alter the semiotic DNA of an image? What does it mean to recode and interfere with its pictorial contract with a viewer and to irresistibly alter it? We had to supplant the image's noeme and explore its accidental, whimsical or wilful misprision in order to transform the unlikely into the only possible meaning. This challenge meant nothing short of short-circuiting the semiotic contract of the image

as a supplement of the real. After inferring in the caption a signified that is implied rather than described, the image becomes irreversibly something else. Within critical remix, the metaphysics of the real yield to that of the unreal, the fabulatory insinuation of a real in excess of the real, and the prescient announcement of a real yet to come. Such images, as Jorge Luis Borges reminds us of books, need only "be possible" to exist.³ What we want to describe here is a morphology of this shift in a selection of indicative images from *The Secret Gestural Prehistory of Mobile Devices*. As we described in the *Secret Gestural Prehistory* blog, the visual archive foreshadows the

*psychopathology of unconscious gesture in search of a purpose... (the) unconscious of contemporary media culture's obsession with the occupation of the hands. It is a familiar, too familiar gestural ergonomics, a bodily pantomime imagining an indispensable, intimate apparel that has modified the body's relation to itself and remote others. At times this seems ordinary, in the form of a glancing touch of the ear, a casual glimpse of one's own hand. Yet it can be uncomfortably distorted, a contortion of ear and shoulder reminiscent of the arthritic malaise known as St. Vitus' Dance. Or an obsessive flailing of the hands while talking to oneself, as in certain pathological forms of mania and hysteria. These images are suggestive of gestural rhythms that synchronize the hand, the ear, the eye and the mouth. In this they foreshadow the potential media that will, in time, resolve these postural gestures into a meaningful function: the immediate and continuous communion with unseen and absent others.*⁴

LITERAL

With many images in the archive the degree of semiotic work that captions are required to do can be minimal. In the face of a scenario of mobile ergonomics that governs the project and precedes the re-writing of any image, all that is often required is the detonation of a kind of logic bomb that sets off a semantic chain reaction or interference of the image's semiosis. Some have a convergent and suggestive immediacy that brings to mind gestures that have become part of the technologically modified body. These are suggestive of the pleasant aesthetics of unexpected coincidence. The 1976 photograph of two women in a Manhattan jewellers, for instance, is an indicative image of the techno-mediated body.⁵ The older woman in the background uncomfortably cradles an analogue handset between her left shoulder and ear that in a weird way is more contemporary for us perhaps than that of the woman in the foreground, whose gesture resembles a pre-mobile ergonomics. Her countenance speaks of the easy composure of "anywhere, anytime" associated with mobile telephony. As well it is the performance of an ironic and reflexive "I'm talking on the phone" pantomime.

This image is the heraldic *mise en abyme* of the entire project. It is an image, in miniature, of the expansive journey of postural distortion suggesting the becoming-media as intimate apparel associated with the vectors of mobility. This was something of the response we had when the *Atlantic Monthly* ran a feature on the project in 2010.⁶

In the casual image of a jogger in Central Park in New York in 1976 is the intuitive, becoming third nature of the seamless punctuation of immediacy by mediation.⁷ It demonstrates the doing of something, in this instance, jogging, that not so long ago would require a more elaborate and labour intensive rupture of the event to make a phone call. That is, it would have necessitated a definite pause in the act of jogging, the

pursuit of a telephone booth, a conversation, then the resumption of jogging. This sequence of discrete events is captured as a singularity in this image, as something that happens simultaneously, as suggested in the caption that accompanies the image: "54 at 10. cul8r."

Here the two actions are co-existent: the seamliness of different things is seamless, as in a suturing or stitching together of separate and even discordant elements. Paul and Linda McCartney visit Bill Wyman backstage at a 1978 Rolling Stones concert in New York. The mediated countenance of both Linda and Paul distracts the eye and the ear respectively, suggesting something, perhaps, of the quality of their company (the caption for this image reads "Bill basks in self-congratulation, knowing that at least two people bought, or at least have seen *Stone Alone*. Its influence exceeds his expectations as Paul McCartney brings a new inflection to 'the look'").⁸ The idea of the 'look' was developed early on in the history of the project, to capture anachronistic, pre-mobile gestures that would not emerge till the end of the century but seem to have been anticipated in Swinging London, as other images from this period suggest. And even more broadly the happening vibe of the 'Sixties' generally. Take the image Students, University of Sydney, 1969.⁹

The literal caption that accompanies this image, "Intimations of the tweet economy," describes what is familiar to us via the "look." But it also captures the social displacement associated with mobility. The student is there but not there, present *and* absent. Here is a totemic icon of the familiar punctuation of the social by a tacitly accepted removal from the present. But as in the previous image of Wyman and the McCartneys, both acts are enacted at the same time. It is an instance of what we understand today as multi-tasking. But more specifically, in terms of the co-presence of speech and writing, talking and texting, it is an instance of a co-present orality and literacy.

Another example similar to this is Melbourne University Student 1967. This image unwittingly adds a nuance to the idea of the academic Trivium, adding banality to logic and rhetoric. Amid an assembly of other students whose gaze is fixed elsewhere, the young man in question is also somewhere else (“The urgency of this anti-Vietnam war ‘sit-in’ fails to hold the attention of at least one student. His interlocutor was apparently ‘doing nothing’ at the time”).¹⁰

Here we see at work the notion of performative utterance of anything, no matter how trivial, simply for the fact of its possibility wherever, whenever. And often when it happens it punctuates, disrupts a scene of discourse that is prior to it. As here, this may be in the middle of a lecture, a meeting or, in this instance a demonstration. Cheek by jowl with many other people who can’t escape the ambience of his response (and usually at high volume), the young man’s focus on the speech of an absent other unavoidably becomes public information. It’s no accident, of course, that Sadie Plant’s notion of “enforced eavesdropping” was coined in relation to a Motorola-commissioned study of the sociality of mobile phone use in 2001.¹¹ The cultural critic Mark Dery wrote an eviscerating 2010 essay on the same topic called “The Age of Always Connect,” in which he described the pathogens of over-sharing, listening without consent to private conversations and the implicit death of shame that comes with them as the psychopathology of our mobile times. The essay is a cautionary tale about the allegorical aspects of mobility that are explored in the *Secret Gestural Prehistory* images. It speaks of the double-headed hydra of mediated solipsism, the silent fixation on screens that makes “solitude portable,” and the unwanted broadcasting of privacy, such as “the stranger with the headset, chattering blithely about her irritable bowel as she elbows past you at the supermarket meat counter.”¹²

The ergonomics of certain physical contortions and gestures to do with cradling a phone to the ear while carrying two bags of shopping and opening a car door is now so imprinted on the psyche that when we look at historical images such as these it seems unwittingly to be the only possible explanation, even in the event of its impossibility. For instance a group of students in Tel Aviv in 1968 sit talking in the sun. The caption, “Yet another early instance of cervical spine dysplasia,” may require some glossing. But the epiphany certainly comes when the image becomes an emblem of the text.¹³

The contortions of telesthesia range across class, anonymity as well as celebrity. Two shots of John Lennon captured during the *White Album* sessions in 1968 reveal a locution of the body to do with a new medium that is akin to the becoming prehensile of the thumb in primates on the way to lighting fires.

Or putting out fires, as in the case of a group of protestors in Saskatchewan in 1979. The caption underlines the point: “Citizens of mixed heritage (metis) denied the status of ‘treaty Indians’ blockade the entrance to a national park in Regina, Saskatchewan. Reinforcements will soon be on their way.” This caption re-codes the visual casualness of what was probably a scratch of the ear into an unlikely call for assistance.¹⁴

The anonymous image of a sheep farmer in the Wimmera in the 1940s similarly engages quite self-consciously with a mobile narrative: “Checking the latest bale prices from Dalgety. The loyal heeler awaits the resumption of his master’s voice.”¹⁵

And further, take the image of a group of trend-setting teenagers in Australia in 1974.¹⁶

Attending a concert of the rock band the Coloured Balls at the Melbourne Showgrounds, this young

woman proves once again that while Australia in the 1970s was still considered ‘the Antipodes,’ in the age of mobile telephony being “antipodal” is a relative concept.¹⁷

RELATIONAL

The Secret Gestural Prehistory of Mobile Devices is ostensibly a writing project. In wanting to re-write an image’s semiotic DNA, it tactically juxtaposes images with captions to generate a composite meaning that suggests an alternative to what we are looking at. The suggestiveness of the relations between text and image is crucial, since it enables a dramatic, rather than didactic engagement between viewer and image. The moment of realisation, of seeing something that might not have been immediately apparent (let alone intended), is akin to the generative force of a Joycean epiphany. James Joyce translated the religious significance of the epiphany into a secular understanding of the sudden manifestation, after Aristotle, of the essential “quidditas” or “whatness” of a thing; an unexpected radiance in an image that was not implied or intended.¹⁸ This was very much the motivation behind the caption for the image of an unnamed archaeologist in 1908: “One can only wonder if the classicist Eric Havelock drew inspiration from this image while writing his *Preface to Plato* (1963).”¹⁹

The image of a distracted French archaeologist is a fitting emblem of the “silent revolution” of people reading that Havelock described when mapping the historical shift from orality to literacy. The caption, then, not only frames the image, but re-defines it.²⁰

As in the image of Andy Warhol and Mick Jagger from the early 70s, in which Warhol sits determinedly with both hands covering his ears: “At first appearance this image suggests that Andy has clearly had enough of

Mick’s relentless talk about himself. A closer reading reveals Mick’s displeasure that his friend prefers the company of others not even in the room.”²¹

The relational aesthetics at work in this photographic imagery are imminent, not immanent. They emerge from the juxtaposition of a written narrative, scenario or situation that is suggested, a heuristic that guides a specific reading of the image. What we were surprised to find, though, was how potent this dramatic relational aesthetic was in relation to the rich and varied history of visual art, a pictorial form not often given to the casualness of isolated moments. The history of photography, and specifically vernacular candid images or snap shots, seemed an appropriate and even logical site for acts of re-writing. However paintings from different historical periods and cultural traditions also revealed unexpected anachronisms. Such invitations to transform historical, pre-photographic images suggest that the unconscious becoming of mobile ergonomics has always been part of the Western imagination at least (as of this writing we have not yet explored Eastern or other pictorial traditions). One may not be surprised, then, to encounter an image of technological innovation during the Renaissance, a time of dramatic experimentation in the aesthetics and optics of pictorial space. A detail from Sandro Botticelli’s “Three Miracles of St. Zenobius,” from 1500-1505, is such an image. The rather droll caption, “The fourth, unforeseen miracle in this image would only become apparent several centuries later,” is deliberately dramatic, in the Aristotelian sense, in that it prompts the viewer to seek out and discover a fugitive, previously unknown image of the miraculous rather than simply read about it.²²

Even the imagination of the late Middle Ages seems to have been preoccupied with the unconscious lure of a modernity to come. In Hieronymus Bosch’s 1475 “The Cure of Folly,” the allegorical image of folly that is

central to the image, when detonated by the caption, re-wires the image in such a way that once it is seen in this light is difficult to see in any other way: “Medieval allegory bespeaks a folly to come, in the form of grandiloquent banality. Researchers at the University of California (Davis) recently identified a previously unknown Latin inscription in this image, discovered from X-Ray analysis of the book teetering on the nun’s head (historically taken to be an image of folly). The text, ‘Non ultum. Quis es vos usque?’ roughly translates as ‘Not much. What are you up to?’”²³

NARRATIVE

The centrality of a modernist meta-narrative associated with “the look” became a recurrent theme as the project evolved. This was irresistibly suggested by a Eugene Atget portrait of a vernacular street scene in 1900: “Eugene Atget unwittingly captures an image of an unforeseen expression of literary modernism in the streets of *belle époque* Paris.”²⁴ Again, this is where the caption, as a micro-narrative, re-writes the image in the diegetic process of its telling. A 1967 image of the Velvet Underground in situ at the Factory in New York City focuses attention away from John Cale, who seems to be the focal point of the shot, on to Paul Morrissey who sits in the background: “At the Factory with Andy’s latest find, The Velvet Underground, collaborator Paul Morrissey has tuned in and turned on. With a discreet turn of the head John Cale senses what is happening and is keen to succumb to the new habit.”²⁵

In an image of Andy Warhol and Jonas Mekas from 1965, the banality that Warhol made famous in his signature utterance of “gee” seems to be the downplayed, underwhelmed vibe of the image’s portent of a banality to come, the bland ordinariness of things that are said on the phone; especially when encoun-

tered in public, such as on buses and trains.²⁶ And of course we all learned to love the alien during the 70s. Ziggy Stardust not only played guitar, was well hung and snow white tanned, but as David Bowie intoned, he also blew our minds.²⁷ Images such as staged studio portraits of Ziggy (and there are many others like it) seem to preclude the need for a caption even though they invite one. The relational situation of the image under the rubric of something called *The Secret Gestural Prehistory of Mobile Devices* is sufficient to make it bristle with an impossible electricity, the echo of a past-future tense. The strategy of the double-take, the invitation or reflex to look again, was also a key to the tone of the captions. In an image of John Lennon in Hamburg in 1962, for instance, it is not immediately clear what his gaze is fixed upon. The caption helps to guide our attention and bring it into focus: “Rare image of John Lennon distracted during a performance at the Kaiserkeller Club.”²⁸

Other images irresistibly invite a more mischievous approach to the relational intimation of an obscure or hidden narrative to be discovered. The poetic at work in this re-writing and re-coding is a literate as much as visual technique of observation, to borrow from Jonathan Crary’s study of optics and ways of seeing in the nineteenth century. Rather like the optical phenomenon of a “retinal afterimage” central to the act of viewing, textual captions or narratives inscribe a kind of palimpsest over the image.²⁹ The superimposition of a telephonic connotation in the image over its pre-telephonic denotation is not only in the eyes of the observer, but is a blurring of semantic sense in the act of observation. It is a variation on the persistence of vision associated with proto-animation techniques such as the thaumatrope, where separate images of a bird and a cage can be superimposed as a bird in a cage through movement. In such examples micro-narratives draw the viewer into a scenario that is culturally specific and relies upon regional, ethnic or

topical knowledge appropriate to the image in question, such as the image of an unidentified man at a picnic in Madeira in 1959. If the punctum doesn’t find you, the caption prompts you to be more responsive to its possible call: “The *Echium candicans syn fastuosum*, not to mention Malvasia, Terrantez and Verdelho may well be known throughout the world. Here we see the innocuous, vernacular potential for a new Pride of Madeira.”³⁰ In this instance there is an uncanny plausibility associated with the fictional anachronism that is generated by the specificity of visual detail: mobility and speech at a distance, along with fortified wine and the *Echium candicans* are among the treasures of the eponymous Portuguese island.

Similarly, the image of a group of young Italian lace makers in 1959 is irreversibly short-circuited by a rather oblique refraction in what is being seen: “Dating back to 1530, *Lo Giuoco del Lotto d’Italia* (more commonly known as Bingo or “Housey Housey”) was the first known instance in Western culture in which participants observed the call to ‘eyes down.’ These young Italian women respond to the irresistible call of another.”³¹

This project and others like it³² discipline their visual objects and textual narratives into loose coalitions that only hold together as long as they are held together. In this case, the textual denotation that reprograms the image, as well as the detonation that explodes its connotative capacity is temporary and will only last as long as it is remembered by the viewer. In this sense it fits with Edward Colless’ discussion of transdisciplinarity. Colless argues that the “trans-” suggests “drift and errancy, as disciplines cross each other with the eventful possibility of collision or collusion but without the eventuality of their consensus.”³³ In *The Secret Gestural Prehistory of Mobile Devices* this drift and errancy is a kind of Situationist *derive*. It precipitates not only the possibility of consensus, of seeing what is

implied, but also of another kind of sense. Telesthesia, or sensing at a distance is one name for this. Another is mobile telephony.

In the spirit of critical remix, the genre in which this project is situated, it is appropriate to conclude by speaking through someone else, to quote someone already quoted. We need to speak, as Mark Amerika would have it, in an act of remixological ventriloquism.³⁴ This “transit of disciplinarity” is itself unsettled by an “etymological alternation between being a passage ‘across’ states (a transfer that doesn’t lose its sovereignty or citizenship) and an extensive vector ‘beyond’ states.”³⁵ In other words, for a long time we have been hangin’ on the telephone. ■

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