THE VISUAL AND CONCEPTUAL NATURE
OF MY WORK IN THE PLASTIC ARTS

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Master of Fine Arts

by

Craig Alan Dennis, B F A

The Ohio State University
1974

Approved by

[Signature]
Adviser
Department of Art
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface—Concerning Media.........................1
Purpose of Cultural Investigations.................3
Beginnings........................................4
The Visual as an Evolutionary Element.............6
The Technological Nature of Our Culture..........7
Methods of Cultural Investigations...............7
Conclusion.........................................9
Bibliography......................................10
Plates.............................................11
Preface—Concerning Media

As an artist, I like to think that all media are at my disposal. When I approach a particular image or idea, I select that medium which will best produce the visual qualities with which I am concerned. Our technological advancements have put the contemporary artist in the unique position of having a great number of media through which to produce his idea, creating an unprecedented number of visual possibilities. This fact has given me a great deal of freedom in carrying out my visual investigations.

I have chosen to work largely in printmaking recently because it has afforded me the greatest variety of visual possibilities within a given composition. The modern printmaker has at his disposal a full range of drawing and painterly techniques, as well as numerous photographic and three-dimensional opportunities—all of which may be encompassed in a single work. The versatility of the print media has allowed me to pursue my color concerns and to experiment with various types of drawing. More recently, it has given me the chance to utilize the visual qualities of a photograph, a process unique to our present culture.

The photograph has lent a certain factual or undeniable quality to the visual impact of images. This allows the subject to become primary and the execution to be secondary. One of the most unique aspects of the photographic medium is its ability to reproduce convincing detail. The adjective
"photographic" (as in "photographic reproduction" and "photographic memory") has come to be synonymous with the word "detailed". Because of this understood awareness, when someone views a photograph of an object or an act, he does not doubt the real existence of that object or act. The viewer is first struck with what the subject of the photograph is and then, secondarily, he may examine how, why or when it was taken. This factual quality inherent in the photograph has given my cultural investigations a certain amount of honesty they might never have attained otherwise. It has allowed some of my imagery to suggest particular real objects and acts, not merely because I have drawn them or painted them or even photographed them in a certain way, but because the viewer knows that what they resemble really existed.

At the same time, the photographic process, extended through the printmaking processes, has given me many alternative ways of presenting a particular subject. There are several intermediate steps between the original subject and the finished image in my print that allow for the highlighting and isolation of certain visual qualities found in the original image. Utilizing these opportunities, I accentuate only those qualities of the photographed subject that are the most supportive of the overall concept and visual content of my finished lithograph or etching.

Because of their high degree of versatility, I have found the print media to be invaluable tools in my visual
examinations. They have broadened the range of visual suggestions I can make as an artist and at the same time helped me maintain the reality of my subject matter.

Purpose of Cultural Investigations

The major reason for examining the visual variations between previous cultures and ours is to lend some insight as to the direction of our cultural evolution—what we are and where we might be going. Of course, my work is personal, limited within this context by my own investigations and observations, but I do try to be as honest as possible about the images I use. The important thing here is the idea of investigation and observation—I intend my work to be just exploratory visual suggestions and nothing more. I am not trying to make any particular didactic statement with my images. If a viewer sees a particular work as "sad" or "funny" or "tragic", that is largely his doing. In selecting an image to use in any particular piece, my concerns are twofold. First, I am concerned with what qualities of the image relate to an overall visual direction or change I see our culture taking. Secondly, I consider what means of presentation will best relate those visual qualities to previously existing standards. Of course, these considerations involve the basic elements of forceful composition to single out and present the comparisons and contrasts I am trying to make.

When I have finished a piece, I, also, often have a personal reaction to it, but the main intention of any given
work of mine is not to state that something is good or bad, right or wrong, but rather to say--here it is, consider it. I find it totally unreasonable to make value judgements on new realities based purely on codes of ethics developed from old myths. It would seem more reasonable to adjust the old myths to new realities to better fit the framework of present existence. As our culture evolves, we are faced with new possibilities which must first be realized and then judged. Rather than viewing my work as a sort of index to measure the degree to which our technological orientations have removed us from being human, I prefer to see it as a visual record of how we have redefined that quality.

Beginnings

I first started to deal with the technological image as an undergraduate art student. I was concerned only with making relatively simple Dadaistic or Surrealistic associations between anatomical and mechanical subjects. My fascination with these images came largely from a curious relationship I observed between the formal aspects of man and his creation. For every anatomical structure I used, I could find a mechanical counterpart that resembled the original anatomical part not only in function, but in its visual qualities as well. For example, nerves resemble electronic circuitry not only in function, (carrying impulses) but also in their visual qualities (circuit boards have similar patterns and lines to those of nerves or ganglia). It seemed to me that man was following a system of
investigating himself through medical technology and then recapitulating his findings through mechanical technology. This series of visual exercises gave me a great opportunity to experiment with various methods of composition versatile enough to allow for development in many media.

After a fair amount of art school experience and the development of some technical proficiency in drawing, printmaking, painting and sculpture, I started to make certain other realizations about the technological images with which I was concerned. While these factors were nothing particularly new to the art world, my awareness of them then had a great influence on my future selections and presentations of images.

First, I began to realize more strongly that the means of representing a particular image could greatly influence the connotations derived from it. For example, a photograph of a brain generally creates a response of disgust from the viewer, while a detailed drawing invokes a much less disturbing image, and a mere diagram of the brain has practically no emotionally disturbing qualities.

At the same time, I had a growing awareness of the relationship between the various means of visually presenting an image and the type of physical and mental activity that produced it. Using the brain image again, a photograph of a brain suggests a concern for the reality of the object, and thus exhibits factual concern. The detailed drawing of the brain represents the act of consciously selecting only the most important elements of the actual
object for presentation. A more expressionistic drawing suggests even more selective concerns for certain aspects, and a diagram indicates a concern for only certain thoughts about the general concept of the brain. In other words, every image has its own identity or reality as an artifact. In my more recent work, I have utilized the visual image as an artifact of our culture and juxtaposed that image to those of previous cultures and concepts with the hope of gaining some insight as to our present directions.

The Visual as an Evolutionary Element

A visual is both a record of the intentions or concerns that produced it and a stimulus that affects the way a viewer sees. As a product, a visual can contain suggestions about the process used to create it as well as the reasoning behind its existence. In this way, the visual acts as a record of a particular frame of mind. As a stimulus, the existence of a visual can suggest future possibilities, or it may contribute to a total environment which could alter future possibilities. Because of this dual position of a visual, it can be seen as an evolutionary ele-

---

1 By "artifact", I here intend not only the actual object itself, but all the activities and thought processes which went into its creation, as indicated by the physical qualities of the object.

2 I am using the term "visual" as a noun in this instance to include the activities and thought processes involved in the production of a particular image. I do this to allow the reader to regard the visual more as an artifact than merely an image.
ment or indicator within a culture—serving as a statement of intent for the culture and simultaneously influencing the future development of that culture. When I select a particular image to use in my work, I try to gain an awareness of the particular activities or the frame of mind its visual qualities indicate about the culture that produced it.

The Technological Nature of Our Culture

The technological endeavors of our society in the past fifty years have, in my opinion, far surpassed all other concerns. We have become so entrenched in our technological advancement that it would be impossible to remove it from our life-style. It has become so basic to our needs that it has created a "second nature" in our environment. This growing technological nature continually alters the way it feels to be human and the things we view as human qualities. It follows, then, that the most important visuals as evolutionary indicators for our present culture are those produced by our technology. This is why I continue to use many technological elements in my more recent work. Those images that I had used in the previous Dadaistic associations have more recently become the still-life material for my investigations into our cultural evolution.

Methods of Cultural Investigations

I have approached the problem of examining our cultural evolution visually by three methods: 1) Comparisons
between the images of our culture and the images of other, less technologically oriented civilizations, 2) Reinterpretations of previously existing humanistic concepts with images of the present time, 3) Reorientation of present technological images into previously existing concepts.

Examples of the first method of investigation are found in the prints; Altering the Façade, Myth Transition, and Cultured Complements. In these works, I was interested in selecting a basic activity common to both cultures. I then presented the individual approaches to that activity unique to each culture within the same composition. This created the situation of having the visuals of an earlier culture in direct juxtaposition to the visuals concerning the same activities in our culture.

In works representing the second method of investigation such as Personality Assay, Leonardo with Alternating Currents, Eva, and Correcting Renaissance Standards, my considerations were for selecting a relatively timeless concept or subject and examining its alterations through the visuals of the present time. This procedure resulted in works which exhibit the degree of alteration our technological state has brought to basic humanistic concepts.

Oracle, Museum Case, and Binder are works which were approached by means of the third method of investigation. In each of these cases, I attempted to produce the atmosphere of a previously existing concept with present technological images. These works represent an attempt to re-
veal the similarities in intentions between our present activities and other antecedent human activities.

Conclusion

The only thing we have in common with antiquity is our bodies, but our technological growth has altered the way we see, think and feel about that structure. While we are the same animal as our ancestors, we act differently and have different concerns. I can only hope that my visual investigations have been honest enough to suggest what those differences are and what they might become.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


Leonardo with Alternating Currents, Intaglio; 22 x 34.
"Be Mine" Heart — Suspended, Intaglio; 18 X 24.

Drawn and Quartered, Lithograph; 18x24.
Blood Count, Lithograph; 18 x 30.

Myth Transition, Lithograph; 14 x 31.
Cultured Complementa, Lithograph, 18 X 30.

Eva, Intaglio, 24 X 36.
Binder, Wood Sculpture; 22 x 22 x 72.

Correcting Renaissance Standards, Lithograph; 12 x 26.

Adventures in the Skin Trade, Lithograph and wood; 42 x 84.