IN SEARCH OF A MORE ACCESSIBLE ART

A Thesis

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By
Christopher Paul Garvin, B.F.A.

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Master's Examination
Committee:

Richard Roth
Catherine R. King
Daniel Reff

Approved By

Adviser

Department of Art
ABSTRACT

My thesis is a re-accounting of my studio research during the time I spent at The Ohio State University. It presents and explains my basic problem for investigation and the measures I undertook to uncover my answers.

I found my work was too self-referential, and I wished it to be a more accessible statement. Both the concepts and aesthetics of my paintings were to a certain extent inbred. The audience I desired was a broader one. I wanted a body of work that people outside the art scene might find more readable and less intimidating.

I believe art is fundamentally a communicative endeavor so I began to look to other disciplines with similar goals as a mean to improving my work. This search led me to the communication industry where I found my most fruitful sources, beginning with the newspaper and culminating in a multimedia presentation that was my thesis exhibition.
To my parents, John and Margaret Garvin,
without who's sacrifice, love, and support
I would not have attained this level of education
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April 2, 1970.........................Born - Buffalo, New York
1993..............................B.F.A. - Painting, The State University of New York at Buffalo
1993..............................Assistant Curator, Big Orbit Gallery Buffalo, New York
1994 - 95.........................Graduate Teaching Associate, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio
1995 - 96.........................Unit Production Manager, NOC Project National Science Foundation Grant Advanced Computing Center for Art and Design, Columbus, Ohio

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HYPOTHESIS

Upon starting graduate school I found my work was too self-referential; I wished it to be a more accessible statement. I found that both the concepts and aesthetics of my paintings were to a certain extent inbred. People, "in the know," that is other artists could appreciate the subtleties of language that made my work successful. They could read the symbols I incorporated in my work, and the techniques I used to create them. The fact that people outside this group found my work somewhat indecipherable posed both a problem, and a challenge to it's future.

The audience I desired was a broader one. I wanted a body of work that people outside the art scene might find more readable and less intimidating.
I believe art is fundamentally a communicative endeavor so I began to look to other disciplines with similar goals as a means to improve my work. The communication industry in the form of advertisements, in both newspapers and TV became the most fruitful source in my research. Newspapers and TV advertisements appeared to be two media that were universally accepted as communication devices. Both reached a wide audience due to their submission to rigorous constraints that became familiar and thus symbolic. The head-line, column format, news print, and distinctive fold are just a few of these constraints. This uniformity lead to an acceptance of their forms, language, and uses, as broad based communicators. The single most recognized advertising expression has taken the form of the logo, or trademark. These designs have risen to the place of icon's or family seals in our culture. In this singular expression I believe I have found a useful tool for my work.

Incorporation of these conventions, often found in advertising, have become a mainstay in my work. At this point the message in my work and the means of expression have become the same thing. My work now incorporates the tools of our new infotainment society. The use of digital images, computers, TV, video and logos fills my work. This implementation is consistent with my work's position relevant to the communication industry.
My search led me first to the print media in the form of the newspaper. I began to work with it as a material as well as studying it as a source of communication techniques that reaches a large cross section of the population.

At this point in my research I began to read and collect both the New York Times and USA Today on a daily basis. I tracked articles based on the same stories and took note of discrepancies in both style and accuracy. Advertising differences became evident due to the different markets the two papers addressed. Ads for one product even changed from section to section in the same papers. These facts lead me to the understanding of the importance of a defined audience and a customized message in all communication.
I began to believe that universal communicators were rare if not impossible and all my research seemed to lend itself to this belief.

While researching the print medium I made use of it as a material. My painting more and more began to incorporate the actual newspapers. At first they served as an abstract compositional unit, and later in their entirety, as full pages adhered to the canvas. Later works would lose their painted surface altogether. The paintings from this time relied entirely on the newspaper centerfold. They were attached to drywall panels, in as unmediated an application as possible (figure 1). This simple statement appeared to be on the right track in my attempts to attain a successful communicator with a pertinent marriage of both the message and medium.

One anomaly did exist, the drywall. At this point I could not determine its purpose in the work. At times it appeared a vestige of my own personal aesthetic, and thus a residual factor. Other times the drywall appeared to have some symbolic meaning as well as its pleasing aesthetic qualities. For now it would remain a staple of the work.

After minimal success, and despite my initial satisfaction with the work I began to doubt its effectiveness. The newspapers appeared to me to be passé. Newspapers were a major communication force in the past, but were now being devalued in our new communication environment.
Mediums like TV and computers were now the vanguard in the communications industry. While having these questions I also began to notice myself slipping back into making purely aesthetic decisions. This aspect of the work was contrary to my basic goal of making a more communicative art. I found that the use of this material became virtually an aesthetic process.
CHAPTER 3

DESERST STORM AND THE CINCINNATI HOUSE

About the same time I was becoming dissatisfied with the newspaper as an art medium, I discovered two distinctly different forms of communication. Both these forms had a profound affect on my work. I felt that this time in my education was a pivotal period. It was the start of my most fruitful research in the development of the pieces that would make up the largest body of my thesis work.

The first of these encounters was with the DESERT STORM trading card series. This set appeared as a successful use of a simple genre, trading cards. They communicate a political, ideological, and commercial agenda, i.e., patriotism. I had previously believed that successful communication was a marriage of the medium and the message.
This encounter gave me a glimpse at another successful form, a message could be hidden in an unrelated carrier, (subliminal communication).

My second discovery at this time was a person's house in Cincinnati, Ohio (figure 2). The inhabitant used the house as advertising space for his own cause. I saw this home spun act as a personal appeal. It played off the power, and effectiveness of a traditionally commercial venue, the billboard.

Two works came out of these discoveries that would start my current body of work. The DESERT STORM cards became a piece in which two "counterfeit" cards were inserted into the actual set (figure 3). This recontextualization of an existing expression, served as a vehicle for a subliminal message. The work would later be recontextualized again by being submerged into an exhibition focusing on collections. In this show the work was accompanied by a counterfeit letter from the PRO SET Corporation, stating the validity and completion of the set. In its completion this work was successful on many fronts, the most pertinent of which being its role as an exercise in the manipulative power of a strong communicator.

The inspiration received from the man's house in Cincinnati found its implementation in an installation that was part of the House of Cruelty.
The work took the form of a high speed projection of various trademarks that appeared to the audience at short intervals for only a second (Figure 4). The projection was placed in a series of mazes and was encountered as the viewer turned a corner. The speed and installation of this work contributed to the subliminal quality that this piece possessed. The simulation was that of an unexpected communication opportunity. The fact that the work was imbedded in the House of Cruelty made it unexpected and therefore more affective. This was the first of my work of this time to deal with simulation. My later works would refine, enhance, and focus, the simulation aspects of the work.
CHAPTER 4

THE HOUSE OF CRUELTY

The *House of Cruelty* was an exhibition with a basic goal of communicating different meanings of fear as seen by several diverse artists. *H.o.C.* achieved this by reclaiming the haunted house genre. The spectacle created by this haunted house served as an almost universal communicator. The self-important buzz around the entire project became a hook that secured a captive audience for the project (Figure 5).

My involvement in *H.o.C.* helped me realize the power of a spectacle in communicating an idea. This learning experience was pivotal in my development as a professional artist. The insights I discovered, not only about my work but about the way I worked, lead directly to my current art and ideas.
The House of Cruelty also gave me an opportunity to work on a collaborative project. Working in a project oriented atmosphere was very different from my previous method of working. I found this more analytical, and practical approach to production more closely related to my idea's about art. New idea's of audience, performance, spectacle, and media were now mine to explore.

Most importantly the experience I gained from the House of Cruelty had freed me from some of the limitations I had perceived in the art world, most notably the gallery system. New horizons appeared open, not constrained by the normal boundaries. I began to see my position as an artist as liberating again and not constrained to the degree I had once felt.
Collections was an exhibition I co-curated at the Hopkins Hall Gallery. The exhibition was of numerous collections from a diverse range of sources. As a curator I was able to appropriate these objects and recombine them to make a coherent argument. The overt style of the curation was significant. We clearly used these collections as tools for our own play on their situation. The inherent meaning and beauty of these objects were de-emphasized to create a commentary on the nature of curation, and collecting. This meaning was expressed in the installation (figure 6).

The works in the exhibition were wrapped in plastic, and separated into lots. These conventions focused on both the
sterile and commercial natures of any collection, recalling both the flea market and museum. The signage consisted of large red numbers and a mapping system for ultimate clarity, exemplifying a simplicity of organization and a general contempt for the audience in a collecting society.

I found this experience closely related to my other work due to the communicative and editorial nature of curating. Co-curating this show gave me an opportunity to simulate the large and diverse culture of collecting. In my other work I simulate our new and growing infotainment society.

In this exhibition I found a perfect vehicle for my DESERT STORM trading card series. I recontextualized the set by imbedding it in the show, by constructing counterfeit documentation to support the validity of the set.
Recorded Earlier... LIVE was an installation of my latest work, and the culmination of my graduate research. The installation was made up of four video projections and three TV monitors. The images that appeared in the short animation's were created using logos and trademarks in various combinations, frequencies, and speeds (figures 7,8).

This work was a product of my studies of the communication industry. It's barebones simulation of a mass-media encounter is telling of both the methods, message, and results of today's infotainment society.
The methods I used for this installation are indicative of the current methods used upon use every day as members of this society. The flickering lights and the glowing screens become references to modern television. The logos and trademarks I chose, and the combinations I created, allude to the communication industry that abounds. My intent was to immerse a viewer in this constructed environment, a simulation of how we all are immersed daily in this flood of information.

By my merging of all these aspects in this singular experience I believe a coherent bond is created between the message and the medium. This kind of intertwining of message and medium is highly evocative, creating a multi-layered experience that is both ambiguous and highly focused.

This particular installation was telling in its final implementation. My work here had always been concerned primarily with broadening audience appeal, yet this was clearly gallery work. This doubling back happened most unexpectedly. I was surprised to see the formal aesthetic qualities that became apparent in the installation.

This unexpected result and context for my work, however it appeared on the surface, still addressed my initial goals of a more accessible form. The use of more common imagery and applications in the work created a piece appropriate for the gallery context that was born out of commercial means.
This work, although it may never be seen by a none gallery audience, is a challenge for the boundaries I stand opposed to. By creating "fine" art with the tools of a video or commercial artist I created a work that is stimulating to both artists and a more diverse audience. An audience that watches TV can read and recognize this work as well as artists. This crossing of boundaries is not a new idea. Many artists have attempted to deal with these issues, but I feel my work strikes some less traveled areas. My work not only employs popular messages but also uses popular mediums simultaneously.