

Art as Material

Andrew Bracey

“If Giotto had copyrighted his Madonna and baby Jesus, the museums of today would be filled with paintings of dogs playing billiards and other oddness.”ⁱ

I do not know if I speak alone but there is something perversely intriguing about the possibility of museums filled with the ‘odd’ paintings that Vik Muniz hints at above. This is, however, a scary thought, but one not far from the current climate of law suits over authorship.ⁱⁱ Many contemporary artists do mine available pre-existing images in order to create new work, in fact it could be argued that in recent years this has become the dominant tendency in contemporary art. Due to the groundwork of 20th Century pioneers, such as the collages produced by the Cubists, Duchamp’s concept of the readymade, cinematic montage as seen in Sergei Eisenstein films, and more generally in the subsequent unfolding of the postmodernism ideal, it is now accepted that contemporary artists can use virtually any material available to make art with.

The traditions of ‘art materials’ have given way to any manner of possibilities of medium for today’s artists. In the late 1970s a whole host of artists (The Pictures Generation being most prominentⁱⁱⁱ) used imagery that already existed as their art. Barbara Kruger has said that “Their production, contextualized within the art subculture, frequently consists of an appropriation or ‘taking’ of a picture, the value of which might already be safely ensconced within the proven marketability of media imagery.”^{iv} Richard Prince re-photographed billboards featuring the Malboro Man and Sherrie Levine re-shot Walker Evans’ photographs in a manner almost exactly the same as the original. We can see from Muniz’s (absurd) quote above how far the limits of not being able to appropriate from others to make something creatively and

conceptually new could be taken if everything were to remain legally unique and original to the artist.

Appropriation of material has become now almost ubiquitous in work produced in art schools, an indicator of the influence of artists such as those discussed above and of trends to come. Lucy Soutter has said, “appropriated material no longer need signify anything in particular; not the death of the author, not a critique of mass-media representations, not a comment on consumer capitalism. On the contrary, it seems that appropriation is a tool of new subjectivism, with the artist’s choice of pre-existing images or references representing a bid for authenticity (my record collection, my childhood snaps, my favourite supermodel).”^v It could be argued that appropriated material has become the dominant medium of contemporary art.

There is a long history of artists incorporating aspects of other artists’ works into their own. This has happened for centuries as artists often copied works to learn from, even selling them on as their own. We can also see the incorporation of other artists’ methods and ‘trademarks’, such as Bellini’s developments in painting, which are clearly visible in the work of Titian. In turn, his own later, freer way of working was influential to the work of contemporaries, such as Rubens, Valazquez and El Greco. One can argue that these examples are using ‘copying’ as a way of achieving a further end, as opposed to creating works which are the endpoint.

More recently Gerhard Richter has become a painter widely imitated and drawn upon by younger artists, but has also built a career on producing painted copies. He has talked about how his paintings of Titian’s *Annunciation* changed in purpose over time. “To start with, I only meant to make a copy, so that I could have a beautiful painting at home...But then my copy went wrong, and the pictures that finally emerged went to show that it just can’t be done any more, not even by way of a copy. All I could do was break the whole thing down and show it’s no longer possible.”^{vi}

The Richter oil paintings have more in common with the gift shop postcard than the Titian original.

Artists can take the imagery of an iconic work to re-interpret and re-value it. Valesquez's *Las Meninas* has been re-worked by artists as diverse as John Singer Sargent, Pablo Picasso, Richard Hamilton, Salvador Dali and Michael Craig-Martin. David Mabb makes works which fuse William Morris and Kazimir Malevich; Malcolm Morley painted a version of Raphael's *School of Athens*^{vii} and, perhaps most iconically, is Duchamp's cheeky addition to the *Mona Lisa* in *L.H.O.C.Q.*

Artists have also used other artists actual works in and as their own. Like the Crocodiles of this exhibitions title, these artists use other artist's work as a 'second skin' to create layers of authorship, meaning and readings. An erased drawing by de Kooning is a work by Rauschenberg; a Richter painting became a coffee table top in the hands of Kippenberger; Marina Abramovic re-enacts other artists now iconic performances; Pierre Huyghe created a new work, *Light Conical Intersect*, by projecting Matta-Clark's *Conical Intersect* at the site of filming; Maurizio Cattelan made an exact replica of Carsten Holler's exhibition in the gallery next door. More recently, Haroon Mirza has incorporated other artists works into his installations. Mirza has said that, "I treat another person's artwork as I would any readymade material in my work, but it's more akin to Duchamp's notion of the reverse readymade, where he uses the example of a Rembrandt painting as an ironing board."^{viii} If we accept Duchamp's assertion that the artist creates or determines art by an act of choice and selection (urinal, snow shovel or bottle rack to art object) and the readymade has become common place, then surely it is of little surprise that artists have selected pre-existing art as their *material*, alongside mass produced objects.

Nicolas Bourriaud has discussed extensively the idea of artists re-using items from design, art, fashion and cinema directly as material for new work, and, in turn, blurring the boundaries of

originality and authorship. "These artists that insert their work into that of others contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work. The material they manipulate is no longer primary."^{ix}

Conceptual art often used the strategy of the contract to own works of art that were ephemeral or easily mimicked. A Lawrence Weiner text piece is easily (re)made by anyone, yet only ones that are authenticated are *real* Weiner's. Douglas Gordon has said of his most iconic piece that his "original idea was that somebody could go down to Virgin or Tower video and buy *Psycho* and watch it that way – they didn't have to have my authorisation for it."^x Oliver Laric's *Frieze Stock Footage* has been freely made available as public domain material to be used by others to create new films. In this case anyone has Laric's authorisation to take his original filmed material and do what they want with it, a natural response to Shareware culture. This recalls the spirit of Gordon's statement and approach to using previously existing material and the slippage of an artist's authorship of their work. In 2011 Laric was to be found with a camera in hand at the Frieze art fair, as he created near abstract films of snatched, calm and detailed moments, amid frenzied activity. A fluid collective of young artists, *Cinematic Elective*^{xi}, have created a film which layers Laric's short films one on top of the other; there is an almost infinite amount of possibilities for new work. Laric releases himself from being author of the material shot by him. The 'art' part for Laric, is the idea of the release of shared material, not the actual footage he filmed.

David Osbaldeston has for many years created a series of one-off etchings (plus one artist's proof) of copies of invitations for exhibitions. There is a beauty in the near absurdity of Osbaldeston's gesture, creating a simultaneous celebration and defiance of the mass production of the printing press, as well as a possible critique of art world hierarchies. An early incarnation of

the series saw the artist re-appropriating an invite from Peter Doig's solo show at Victoria Miro to create a 'ghostly echo' of the original. This work could easily move into parody or cliché, if it was not for the conceptual rigour and sincerity within the choice of returning to an almost archaic printing procedure of the etching. This is heightened by his choice to only produce unique editions of only one etchings, in comparison to the hundreds of the original invite, placing a different kind of authorship on the agenda. The initial subject (especially in the age of e-invites) could easily be taken as something everyday or temporal, but is instead elevated to something precious and coveted, just like the Doig paintings, which the initial invite advertises.

It is apt to turn to Walter Benjamin's iconic, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* whilst discussing Osbaldeston's work. It could be argued that he is merely reproducing the reproduced, but it could equally be argued that he is producing something original, thus turning Benjamin's assertion that "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."^{xii} With his etchings Osbaldeston clearly raises questions of authorship, appropriation and reproduction. He not only produces an imperfect, if faithful copy, but a perfectly contained artwork.

In his essay on Valazquez's masterpiece, *Las Meninas*, Michel Foucault talks of all the painting's trickery and concealment. He singles out one of the elements "that fulfils its function in all honesty and enables us to see what it is supposed to show."^{xiii} This is the mirror on the far wall of the painting, the reflection reveals the 'true' subject, which is otherwise hidden. Valazquez was (supposedly) commissioned to paint King Phillip IV of Spain and his wife, Marriana. The mirror reflects nothing that is in the picture, only what is outside it. Andrew Bracey is both the subject and minor character in his series of *Self Portraits*, (2009-ongoing), much like the royal couple in *Las Meninas*. He is often

overshadowed by, or at least seen simultaneously with (the mirrored surfaces of) other artists' work. With a magpie mindset Bracey parasitically inhabits artworks that feature a reflective surface. Like the grouping of artists in this exhibition, the selection of artists whose work is captured in the self portraits is non-hierarchical in nature, ranging from current art students, emerging artists to the most established contemporary artists.

Toby Huddlestone performs actions and i appears to nteract directly with artworks in his ongoing series of photographs and videos, *Actions in Galleries*. Huddlestone's actions are on a surface level humorous, but also contain elements of institutional critique specific to methods of display and modes of viewing art. Huddlestone's actions often occur in top galleries, both public and commercial and with significant artists. Huddlestone's interaction with these artists as, what is often termed, an emerging artist creates an investigation of the "hierachies and structures inherent within the artworld."^{xiv} Although Huddlestone never 'breaks the rules' in regard to his interactions with the work (no work is damaged or touched unless invited) there is a break of the conventions of normal gallery behavior. His activities range from everyday ones (such as seemingly climbing up a Donald Judd), to reverential ones (such as bowing to Bruce Nauman or praying to Luc Tuymans) to a somewhat more reactionary stance (such as appearing to projectile vomit over an Albert Oehlen or sticking two fingers up to Roman Signer). This range is a necessary one, as it puts the focus onto Huddlestone' actions as opposed to (a specific stance or reaction to) the art or artists.

In Sherrie Levine's famous 'Statement' of 1982 she 'collaged' phrases culled from various theoretical texts, such as Roland Barthes' *Death of the Author* to distinguish her position on what she saw as the absurdity of the originality or 'truth' of painting. She stated, "We know that a picture is but a space in which a variety of images, none of them original, blend and clash. A picture is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres

of culture.”^{xv} Peter Lamb’s *The Unemployed Prophet* (2007) is a visual cacophony of collaged, drawn and painted marks. Dominating the image is a Big brother-esque head, which bizarrely turns out to be appropriated from a shampoo advertisement. Lamb appropriates images from any source, quite happy to incorporate both high and low culture’s images into his own composition. Lamb appears to be following the essence of Levine’s ‘Statement’, differing in his refusal to give up on painting itself.

Emanating from a man’s hands in the composition (this time a Da Vinci drawing) is a rainbow of hand painted lightning rays, akin to the Emperor’s attack on Luke Skywalker in *Return of the Jedi*. These rays continue out of the picture frame, down the wall, across the floor and back up as part of a companion work by Aislinn Ritchie, who has furthermore taken elements from Lamb’s hybrid collaged painting to create her animation. Familiar elements from Lamb’s work are activated, altered and eliminated by Ritchie using traditional stop motion animation techniques to highlight the collage elements of Lamb’s original. Using Perspex on top of Lamb’s painting, Ritchie layers playful collaged and painted activity on two additional levels of Perspex. Like the crystals in J.G. Ballard’s novel, *The Crystal World*^{xvi} Ritchie’s additions change, challenge and transform the original.

There is a macabre sense of humour on show here, akin to artists such as Maurizio Cattelan, David Shrigley and Martha Colburn. As Ritchie describes, “people pull the heads off smaller bodies and throw them across to each other, swapping positions. Also a girl pulls back the eyelids of the main male figure (whose eyes are closed) while a golfer hits some eyeballs into the sockets”^{xvii}. The viewer can take both in simultaneously to see the differences and similarities or step into each artists separate worlds. There is a complex visual reading as one can simultaneously and separately see the work of Ritchie, Lamb and Da Vinci, within one work.

In his brilliantly titled essay, *Beauty in the Age of Road Kill*, painter Jonathan Lasker talks of our age being the first to live without a clearly defined faith and as such, “we see much more around us than our ancestors did. People with beautiful myths see beautiful things. Yet in our culture, all bets about beauty are off. We’re going to have to do without it for a while to come. We have so much else to see.”^{xviii} If Lasker is correct then we are also living in a time that seemingly holds beauty up high. People are increasingly being heavily influenced by the media and pressured to look and dress like a star or a model and to have sex like porn stars. Nathan Baxter’s new piece of work directly subverts this form of pressure. Footage from porn films is taken and degraded by the artist through the use of distracting flashing lights that disturbs the camera’s autofocus. Perversely, given the subject matter the camera is an outdated child’s toy, the Fisher-Price Pxl 2000. The work is also site-inspired as *Over+Out* was previously an S&M dungeon. The dark, sinister and hard to grasp feedback imagery of Baxter’s film is in keeping with the hidden away past life of the gallery space.

In Alexander Kluge’s essay, *The Cosmos as Cinema*, the film director talks of the idea of ‘Antique Light’, as imagined in 1846 by Felix Eberty. This is the idea that light not only crossing the Universe is centuries old, but that “all of the prehistory is stored in the universe in tracks of light. Thus the entire history of the world is travelling through the cosmos as MOVING SEQUENCES OF IMAGES (Eberty did not know the word cinema).”^{xix} As history of the world, as suggested by Kluge/Eberty could be applicable to Griffiths’ approach to using visual archives.^{xx} Utilising a projectionist’s viewing mindset, Dave Griffiths has long mined hundreds of films to isolate cue dots from the top right hand corner of single frames. These have been crafted into a number of films and most recently a series of solar prints. Whereas the projectionist patiently waits for the fraction of a second when the cue dots arrive fleetingly, in Griffiths’ works the cue dot is ramped up in focus and omnipresent. As the artist says “It must

be the smallest structure in film. I like the idea of making apparent the smallest form, working almost at the molecular level of film”^{xxi}. Griffiths straddles both elements of this exhibition. He takes elements from artistic works (if we count cinema as such) directly to create his work and also re-uses previous works that feature the cue dots in order to make new work of his own.

The artists in this exhibition all show a creativity and industrious approach to re-using existing artworks and material to create new works. As the world continues to produce more and more information and the possibilities of originality become further reduced, it will be interesting to see how artists can use what exists to create new meanings. Lets see some more metaphorical crocodiles thrashing.

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This is the paper half of an essay which will be completed by Kate Buckley during and after the exhibition, viewable at www.crocodileswithasecondskinthrash.wordpress.com. She will focus on the remaining artists in the exhibition and specifically the idea of artists who re-use their own artworks in order to create new works and meanings.

ⁱ Ed. Lesley A. Martin, *Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer*, (Thames & Hudson, London, 2005), p.91.

ⁱⁱ For instance Jeff Koons has to date lost three out of four cases of copyright violation brought against him and ironically recently lost a case of intellectual property rights, concerning his ‘balloon dog’ sculptures and two separate businesses creating trinkets featuring this previously widely available shape.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Pictures* was an exhibition at Artists Space in 1977 curated by Douglas Crimp featuring 5 artists, which became a catalyst for a wider critical grouping of artists including Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince.

^{iv} Barbara Kruger, “Taking Pictures” in *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, Ed. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing,2003), p.1042.

^v Lucy Soutter, ‘The Collapsed Archive: Idris Khan’, in *Appropriation*, Ed. Dave Evans, (London, Whitechapel Publications, 2009), p.166.

^{vi} Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting*, (The MIT press, Cambridge, 1998), p.226

^{vii} Two oddities are of interest around this painting. One is that it was started in a lecture theatre before an audience of students, in lieu of a more traditional artist’s talk. Secondly the heads of some of the philosophers float to the side of their bodies. The painter Charlene Von Heyl has said in the catalogue for *Oranges & Sardines* that her father-in-law saw this painting when Morley was painting it and it was a happy accident resulting from filling in squares one by one on a grid.

^{viii} Haroon Mirza & Lisa Le Feuvre, “A Conversation”, in *Movement 1*, Ed. Isla Leaver-Yap, (Lisson Gallery, London,2011), p.73.

^{ix} Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, (New York, Lukas & Sterberg, 2005), p.13.

^x Douglas Gordon & Jean Wainwright, “Mirror Images” in *Talking Art*, Ed. Patricia Bickers & Andrew Wilson, (Ridinghouse and Art Monthly, London, 2007), p552.

^{xi} In this case two members, Thomas Went and Rebecca Steward have worked on the Laric project. www.cinematicfineart.tumblr.com

^{xii} Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, (Jonathan Cape, London, 1999), p.214.

^{xiii} Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (Routledge Classics, New York, 2002), p.7.

^{xiv} www.tobyhuddleston.net/index.php?/intactdoc/actionsphoto/ accessed 21/4/2012

^{xv} Sherrie Levine, ‘Statement’, in *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, Ed. Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing,2003), p.1067.

^{xvi} Imagery described within this novel gave the title to this exhibition and its predecessor, *A Blind Python With Jewelled Eyes*. www.blindpython.org.uk

^{xvii} from email conversation with the artist, 30/4/2012.

^{xviii} Jonathan Lasker, *Complete Essays 1984-1998*, (*Edgewise Press, New York, 1998*), p. 48.

^{xix} Alexander Kluge, *Cinema Stories*, (New Directions Books, New York, 2007), p. 91.

^{xx} His most recent work, *Babelfiche*, perhaps is most explicitly referencing these ideas. www.babelfiche.net/

^{xxi} www.untitledgallerymanchester.com/exhibitions/2011/enter-a-small-room-part-two.htm accessed 26/4/2012.