Provoking a Language of New Media: Postcards from Florida

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Like a DJ, I have juxtaposed images from my research, teaching and art practice to illustrate my life in education as a bricoleur in spaces between Education and Fine Arts. I hope to show how my prior research into hip hop graffiti culture (Rahn, 1999, 2002), has evolved into multimedia production and teaching. My intent in studying hip hop culture was not to standardize and sanitize complexities into methods of education, but to question themes such as motivation, aesthetics, and ways of constructing knowledge.

This image of the DJ, transforming a passive obsolete play back machine into an active musical instrument, is central to my philosophy of media literacy. I show it to my students as a metaphor for transforming passive consumers into active agents in the production of media. I say, “This is the kind of commitment I expect to see from you in taking ownership of ideas and the application of skills.” I reference it when questioning themes of authorship and appropriation, with disregard for high low culture or race since the innovation is in the mix.
A history can be traced from punk culture with its do-it-yourself attitude (DIY) to many graffiti writers who take the means of production into their own hands. They learned to use computers on a need to use basis, to reconstruct samples of sounds and images and to communicate to peers through personal web sites. The internet was quickly adopted as the optimum medium for disseminating images and networking within a global community. The anarchic yet entrepreneurial spirit of graffiti writers lent itself well to net communities that existed outside of the gallery-museum establishments.

On the surface, old school hip hop graffiti (modeled after the traditional New York traditions of the seventies) is all about form and the macho physical virtuosity of acquiring skills and manipulating tools one level at a time, in competition with peers. I am often asked where is the content. The content in hip hop culture and and DJing is its context in public space where active engagement with an audience and with the media causes them to become politicized.

Hip hop culture continues to reinvent itself in response to its changing context now that it has evolved from being a regional street culture to a global culture. For example, the DJ and graffiti writer are metaphors for a contemporary culture that continually appropriates and references samples from original sources. I question the assumption that there will always be a steady source of primary material. Many graffiti writers now talk about their community as incestuous, stale, and in need of fresh insights.

Previously, the learning of graffiti was more active in learning as a street culture. Early graffiti writers invented tools in their quest for innovative styles. Now one can buy them in specialized stores. Many writers have become like the students I see in schools playing with clip art like a game of ready-mades. Continual appropriation lacks the purpose of intent that comes from using technology as a tool to communicate the language of new media.

These are the main themes that have evolved into my present work with media production and teaching. I provoke students to take media production into their own hands and to actively engage with an audience outside of their art community. I model the use of discarded technology and the exploration of new media tools as a language. I design curriculum that plays with, yet questions, the issue of authorship in a contemporary digital culture that facilitates and celebrates appropriation. I continue to look for the cracks, or fertile ground within any hermetically sealed community. I gravitated towards new media because it is still undefined as it continually reinvents itself. I struggle to define a language of new media that has a structure but is in a perpetual state of improvisation. New media is highly influential in contemporary culture because it is so experiential and pervasive in everyday life. Within an educational context, I define new media in relation to computers, visual culture such as advertising, television and cinema, and art objects within a historical framework. Like the hip hop community, new media production has an ethos of teamwork.
which works well in teaching. This is traditionally not part of the art world which is built on a pyramid model of trying to get to the top by yourself.

**Storefront Window Exhibitions.**

Art institutions can enclose art rather then open contestable spaces. In Lethbridge, Michael Campbell, Robyn Moodie, and I curated three series of storefront window exhibitions sponsored by the Southern Alberta Art Gallery (SAAG). In “I’ve wanted to show you this for some time now,” a practicing artist was paired with a graduating student who felt ready to show their work. Most of the students used discarded technology and objects. The content of the work was influenced by the context of the storefront window.

Glenn McKinnon appropriated the design from the sales receipt, created by the owner. Instead of “Leo Stringer, clothing sales,” he cut from plywood in the same script font, “Glen McKinnon, artist.”

Brian McKenna filled the space with television monitors that played radically edited, looped segments from shows such as the “Wizard of Oz.” Many unassuming viewers looked curiously into the window to see if it was a new electronics store.

In Robyn Moody’s, “Buzz” the audience completed the work by activating a motion detector that lit up a sequence of fragmented phrases to create a random sentence from infinite possible combinations. Here are excerpts from Robyn's artist statement, “A cigarette burns, a drink sits effervescing, a puzzle slogans that so stir our emotions that we forget what we are being sold. Across the space is a perpetually changing sentence emulating either the direct or indirect messages conveyed through media (I want more…You deserve better…You don’t need more…We don’t deserve success…etc.). Good times are available just under the golden arches, or in a familiar bottle.”

This scene is displayed in a window space—traditionally a place for eye-catching displays intent on drawing in customers. Is it intended as a mass advertisement, or as a curiosity? Most likely the latter, why would we consider it so given we were likely direct participants in its celebration? How is it that we—as clever and hopefully media savvy individuals—can find ourselves swept up in these frenzies of unabashed consumption? Buzz is a representation of the products of “the Buzz” being fully embraced.

Janice Rahn displayed drawings that were scratched into the backs of mirrors. The drawings were made visible by light bulbs shining through the inscriptions from behind the mirrors. Placed behind the glass of the storefront window, the glowing drawings of objects, reflecting in the infinite space of the mirrors, were meant to inspire desire. Her work was entitled, "I couldn't put it into words."
Mary Kavanagh produced two videos of silverware being polished. The video monitors were presented on a Victorian side table. The student exhibiting next to her, Erin Graham, grew up on a sheep farm and installed a video about carding wool. She filled the window space with wool to surround the monitor.

In the spring of 2002, the SAAG sponsored Michael Campbell and I to curate “Pause.” The same number of graduate art students were paired with artists but this time five different locations were used throughout the downtown area, and the exhibitions were up for a month. When the shows opened, the audience was given a map at the SAAG, for a walking tour of the exhibitions.

Storefront Window Exhibition: Under/Over Exposure

The most recent exhibition, Under/Over Exposure (+/- exp), May, 2002, again sponsored by the SAAG, involved an education intern, fine arts students, and children in the schools from ages six to fourteen. Instead of using only the window, we used the entire store space. The students responded to the theme +/- exp in many different ways. Dana Price, a university student, taught herself animation skills after watching the animated films by the brothers Quay. She displayed the bee characters made of found objects. Dana also installed a project using boxes with door peepholes. As a viewer looked into one of the three boxes, he/she saw a magnified series of miniature surreal room interiors. The exteriors looked like everyday boxes, disguising the interior magical illusory worlds.

All of the characters and sets from the school animations were displayed and the animations were looped on a DVD that continually played on a monitor. The content of the projects in the schools were framed by a critique of advertising and youth culture followed with a study of animation techniques. James Wade, a grade nine student wrote a text panel to introduce his animation: “My Claymation project is about Exposure in Advertising.” University fine art students became involved by demonstrating different stop motion techniques such as paper cutouts and set designs. The art teacher was excited because it allowed him to fuse traditional methods with contemporary mediums, resources and ideas. In all the finished projects, students expressed their individual obsessions and preoccupations. The student teacher wrote, “the main bonus for
me was that we all enjoyed ourselves and learned something in the process.” He purchased computers and software to integrate technology as another material in the art room.

A grade eight student made a box around a surveillance camera. When the viewer looked into the box, his/her face appeared on a video monitor displayed in the gallery. The teaching and exhibition of student projects could never be achieved without the collaboration of many people working together within a community of artists and educators. We enjoy working with new media because it poses problems and solutions for integrating technology as an art material in a digital age.

Jackie Thibert, the education intern who taught the projects in the schools and who prepped the show, was then hired by the SAAG to teach workshops and to give tours of the show. School groups came every day throughout the exhibition to participate in the workshops related to the exhibition.

Audio/video installation & Garden, Stride Gallery, Calgary, 2000

“Not Chaos-like Crush’d and Bruis’d, but as the World Harmoniously Confus’d.”
—Alexander Pope

This installation is an example of how technology can be used to embody the experience of structuring a garden. Every summer, I return to my perennial garden north of Toronto to bring it back from the weeds. For two summers I took still images from a camera fixed by the window looking out at the garden. The video loops Sisyphus-like from the physical labor of pulling and digging to create the structure of the garden, back to the chaos of weeds. A formal path in the shape of an ampersand encloses the garden with a structure marked by a path of poured concrete slabs. Each of these slabs was inscribed with drawings or text. For example, the words from Alexander Pope were drawn into a series of consecutive slabs to quote.

The core of the installation was a large ampersand “work-table” constructed from a mosaic of slabs of wood that were carved to appeared as a topographical landscape set on top of sawhorses. This support referenced the workshop atmosphere of the piece. The audio and video was viewer-activated. Each speaker had a different water sound that played from cassette tapes beneath the table. As the viewer lifted the cloche to look closer at the miniature diorama, they would also hear the particular sound coming from that speaker, distinct from the chorus of sounds coming from the other speakers.

On our property, Michael and I staged a tableau of retro 50’s living room furniture on a green rug that looked liked a rectangle of mowed grass in the meadow. The furniture was set on fire and videotaped. It was looped so the fire

http://www.ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v08n02/contextualexplorations/curriculum/rahn.html (5 of 9) [12/31/2003 7:49:12 PM]
never consumes the furniture. The narrative mixed with the video was one side of a conversation between siblings about their father who was suffering memory loss from Alzheimer’s. All he wanted to do was sit and look out at the garden, remembering the way it used to be before it had become overgrown. One day he violently ripped out the plants by the roots and scattered them like fish out of water. The story was fictionalized autobiography.

Wish you were here. Postcards from Florida.

I created *Postcards from Florida* after working with students in the school on a video project using still images. The students focused on literal narrative without considering the formal language of the camera and computer used as a tool.

I wanted to make a video as an example of abstract nonlinear narrative with references to popular culture and manipulation of still images. With this in mind, I saw the palm tree as an icon of the exotic, that could link the images with a formal and conceptual logic. I was hoping that the palm trees would morph from one frame into the next, while drawing attention to the changing background and its relationship to the subject. My focus was not on narrative content but on the formal language of digital video such as juxtaposition and the relational duration from one image to the next. This will be accentuated when I add audio which will be a musical improvisation on a violin.

The video provoked a playful interaction with my environment where I could reference postcards and tourist photos. The freedom of traveling with my laptop allowed me to experiment with video editing as a diaristic sketch rather then planned as a finished film. Before the accessibility of digital editing, filmmakers were tied to large camera crews and video editing equipment. At a time when viewing cinema was every person’s past time, very few individuals were making films. Now anyone has to potential to produce videos. However, this means that a lot of video is made without serious consideration to its unique language.

When students first pick up a video camera, they want to recreate Hollywood movies or MTV and are often disappointed with the results. Their expectation of a tidy wrapped-up ending is satisfied by most Hollywood movies. My role is to collect or make videos that disrupt narrative expectations, by adopting formal strategies such shifting perspectives, slow motion, a play with time, repetition, and abstract narrative. When teaching media production, it is important to create an argument for the difference between commercial and art films. The main difference is the *intent*: to either satisfy mass expectations or to follow a curiosity about the possibilities for tools to create a language of personal expression.

Animation is a technique that has been used in many different ways since the invention of film. It allowed Muybridge to freeze-frame and see for the first time how animals and humans actually moved their bodies. Now artists become excited about being able to change reality. Digital technology has accelerated the
ability of the artist and the appetite of the viewing public for the illusory (Rush, 1999:192). The purpose in using special filter effects is not to play with the ‘bells and whistles’ but to experience the malleable material of the digital image and to learn techniques to create different meanings.

Like new media, hip hop culture is an interdisciplinary language that crosses borders between performance, audio, (breakdancing, rap, MCing), and visual art (graffiti writing). The motivation to learn in hip hop culture comes from the punk DIY ethic to take the means of production and dissemination into one's own hands. There is a disrespect for tidy categories since anything can become part of the mix.

My research of hip hop culture has influenced how I approach new media education. My teaching continues to be informed by practitioners of art and my own practice with new media, video, audio, digital imagery, sensors, objects, and performance that explores the intersection between human experience and physical place. My curriculum is not designed around teaching software skills, but is based on themes drawn from practice such as communication and networking with an audience in public spaces; the desire for community; the motivation to create illusionary space and alternate realities; criticality, problem solving, mentorship, and peer influence. By understanding what it means to engage with these themes, I am motivated to create with my students opportunities for learning and sharing.

References

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**About the Author**

**Janice Rahn** is interested in the poetics and politics of popular culture with implications for education. Her book, *Painting without permission: An ethnographic study of hip hop graffiti culture*, was printed by Bergin and Garvey of Greenwood Press, 2002. She made three documentary videos about hip hop subculture, and is presently finishing a video about the interaction of subcultures and wagon communities within the city of Berlin. She also practices as a visual artist, exhibiting audio video installations that combine new media with sculptural objects. She is presently collaborating on a new media art house project with her husband, Michael Campbell, who teaches in the Fine Arts Department at the University of Lethbridge. She has published several articles about new media production and education. She continues to set up Artist-in-the-School new media projects that link artistic practice to teaching new media skills along with concepts about the social construction of identity. She documents the teaching/learning process on video and edits them to create teacher resources.

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