THE ANNIHILATION OF SPACE THROUGH IMAGE REPRODUCTION

space-time compression in the ancient craft of the beautiful

Throughout the last century the human experience of place has been transformed by mass media technologies. Through the development of the certain technologies, image and sound have been transmitted and received across increasing distance and within shorter timespans, leading to a compressed experience of space by time. This essay will analyse three artworks that respond to this space-compression of media technology: photography in Hannah Höch's 1919 photomontage *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, television in Ant Farm's 1975 publicity stunt *Media Burn*, and the internet in Tabita Rezaire's 2017 video-work *Deep Down Tidal*. By considering each of these artworks, this essay will examine the aesthetic implications of what Karl Marx called 'the annihilation of space by time' (1939:539).
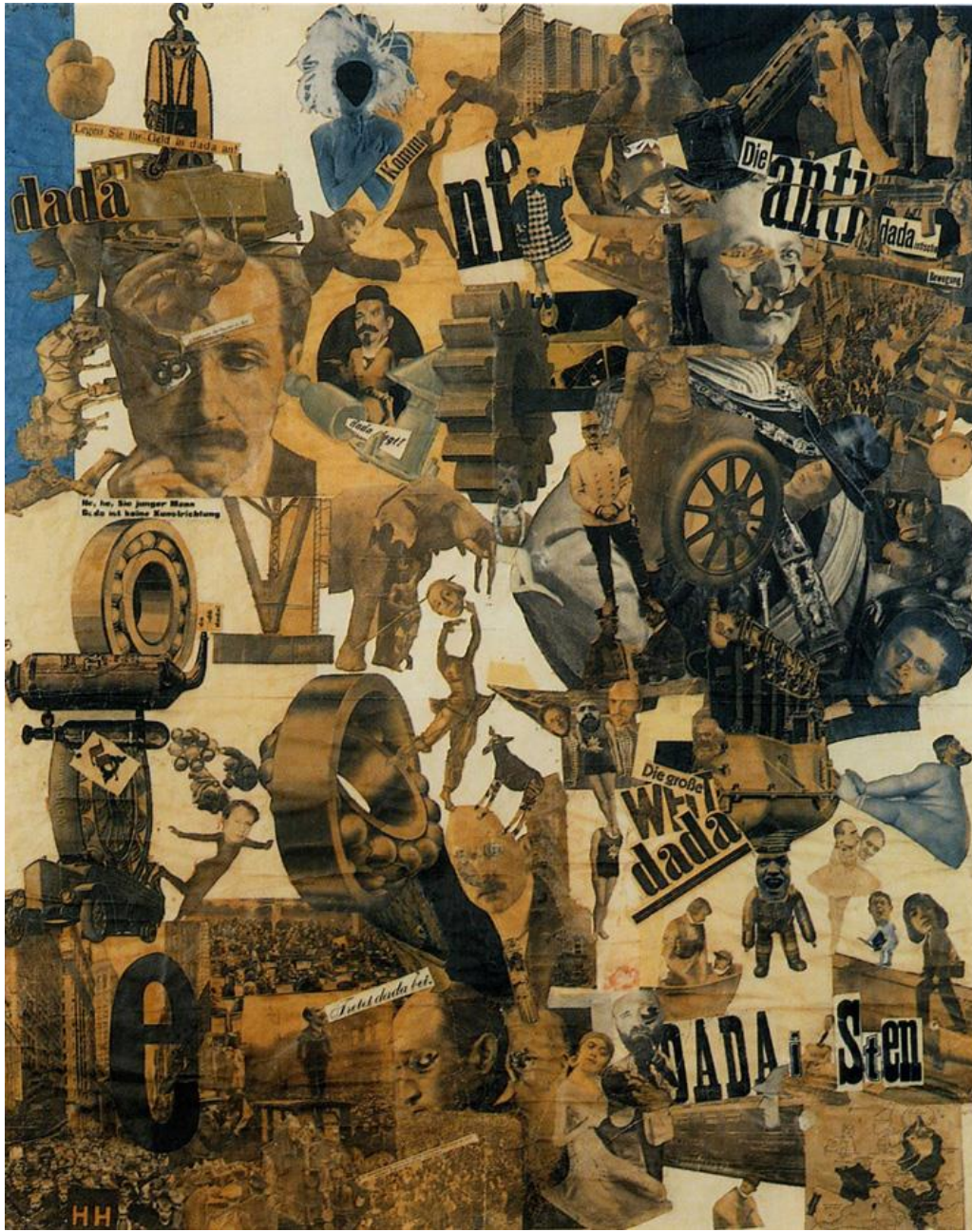
Hannah Höch's elaborate photomontage *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the last Weimar Beer Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany* (1919) (fig. 1) utilizes print media to illustrate the camera's refined capacity to reorganize place into abstract information upon a 2D surface. An early example of the photomontage, the 'Dadaist cross section of Weimar Germany' (Lavin 1993:24) juxtaposes disparate images cut from publications, achieving a formal chaos in its dispersed focal points: hybridized public figures, urban vignettes, architectural fragments, industrial mechanisms, and text. Höch makes no attempt to calibrate their proportions – randomly predetermined by their publication – into a familiar hierarchy of scale. The result is a flattening of perspective, a composition as absurd as its contents. Einstein's face features as the largest aspect of the composition, staring contemplatively down at a sideshow of politicians with baby's bodies, pistons growing out of their heads or moustaches made of wrestlers (fig 2). Einstein is not immune to this Dadaist makeover: his left eye is covered by an image of doughnuts being clawed by a locust emanating from his forehead, above which a steam train rolls, which itself is being pulled upwards by a winch. This array of seemingly disjunct references appears hinged off centrifugal mechanisms – ball bearings, cogs and wheels – implying technological conditioning of experience (Lavin 1993). By juxtaposing and integrating diverse images, Höch disappears distance to exalt photography's loosening of the binds of geographical determination, thereby abstracting our relationship to the land.

Made during an era where 'neither matter nor space nor time ha(d) been what it was from time immemorial' (Valery 1928) *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* is an investigation into how advanced means of communication would reorganize human sense perception and meaning drawn from it (Benjamin 1938:5). Höch's 'cyborg' (Biro 2009) represents the consequential modern subject transformed by a specified set of dynamics between history, technology and place (Harvey 2007). Despite being dependent on photographic reproduction in its construction, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* is particularly sensitive to the reinterpretation of such reproduction, revealing the limitations of the camera's ability to free image from 'its boundaries in space and time' (Berger 1972). The simultaneous moments require zooming and focussing, a mechanism with different results depending on the use of biological or mechanical means. The camera's attempt is a pixelated, traversing crop divorced from its surroundings, whereas, standing before the piece, one's eye could peruse the surface in dynamic response, with peripheral vision anticipating the continuity of the whole (Berger 1972). These different modes of reception have extensive implications on the experience of the work: 'an organizational system... whose signification is *dependent* on the juxtaposition of parts' (Lavin 1993:9). In this sense, photography transforms meaning so that it 'no longer resides in ...(an artwork's) unique surface' which is bound to a geographic location, but in its transmittable information (Berger 1972).

2. Figure 3. Ant Farm *Media Burn* 1975 [photograph] Lewallen C.M and Seid S (eds) 2004 Ant Farm, 1968 – 1978 *University of California Press, Berkley.*

Ant Farm uses the television as the material, conduit and casualty of their homage-cum-critique, *Media Burn*. The radical architecture collective drove a modified 59 Cadillac El Dorado convertible along a traffic-cone-lined runway through a screen of 50 flaming Cathode Ray Tube television sets in the parking lot of the Cow Palace in San Francisco. As singular an event as it was, *Media Burn* was typical of Ant Farm in that it defied classification, being at once a publicity stunt, a video, an elaborate performance, a readymade, an engineering feat and, most importantly, a satire of the great American dream. Operative through the 60's to 70's, Ant Farm's avant-garde practice was both enabled by and critical of the post war boom's redeployment of military resources – human, administrative and technological – towards civilian use (Sardar 1995). Given the imperative of war to gain ground, it is unsurprising that two such technologies were the television and the automobile, which both aspire to space-time compression (Marx and Roe Smith 1994). The significance of these consumer goods, however, was more-so that they *privatised* speed, as their respective forerunners – the train and cinema – long predated them. This 'freedom' to personalize travel and viewing choices emitted a high-octane haze that obscured the origins of both technologies as well as the impacts of their application in the consumer market: a facilitation of hyper individualism.

Staged on the 4th of July, the faceoff between the iconic American commodities road on Uncle Tom's star-spangled coattails, coming clad in gaudy patriotism – from décor to ephemera to anthem –mimicking the excessive patriotism that attempted to justify the U.S invasion of Vietnam. The media stunt was inaugurated by an impersonator of the late JFK whose address called for the end of the three M's: 'Militarism, Monopoly and Mass Media' (*Media Burn* 1975). Twenty years after the post war boom proliferated television sets into American homes, the space and arms races continued to leak ongoing innovation upon the consumer market. A flip side was revealing itself: TV's private luxury; the isolated spectatorship of broadcast transmission (Fink and DeLaure: 2017).

The experience of the iconoclastic collision between Ant Farm's 'phantom dream car' and a 10-foot-high pyramid of televisions would undoubtedly emanate a high degree of what Walter Benjamin refers to as 'Aura' – 'the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be' (1938: 5). As one of the roughly 400 audience members in attendance noted:

> "If you're going to have a Cadillac driving through a wall of TV's, I think it's really important that people get as close… as possible otherwise it's like watching a football game. It's only art if you're right there." (*Media Burn* 1975)

Despite this, most spectators apprehended the happening through its electromagnetic reinterpretation on their personal phosphorus screens from the privacy of their homes. Known for carefully preparing attendant materials (fig 4), Ant Farm sent out press passes alongside their media release to presume their 'ultimate media event' (*Media Burn* 1975) and ensure footage would be 'bought into… houses from far off…. just as water, gas and electricity are' (Valery 1928). As one viewer noted 'it might even make a better television event than a real event'. *Media Burn* made a feature of the spectacular nature of the media landscape by 'using capitalism to smash capitalism (and)… using TV to destroy TVs' (Michels D 2002: 74). The image of the event, immortalized in film, becomes 'more real than reality' (C.W Lewallen 2002: 74) precisely because it is made independent of space and time.

Figure 4. Ant Farm 1975 *Media Burn Ephemera* [scan] Lewallen C.M and Seid S (eds) 2004 Ant Farm, 1968 – 1978 *University of California Press, Berkley.*

Tabita Rezaire's 2017 *Deep Down Tidal* is a vaporwave video essay insisting upon the materiality and located-ness of the internet, while diagnosing the hidden imperial imperatives (Neelufar 2019). Over the course of 18 minutes 'form follows content' (Rezaire: 2017) in the use of aesthetics born from the internet to bust a range of myths about the internet. A pre-windows XP dialogue box with a cobalt blue frame and faun infill warns us 'the internet has been deleted' (fig 5) presenting three options: cry, eat or die. The archetypical computer artifact is then drawn across a satellite image of a dusty planet to create a drag trail that spells out 'ahhhh but I <3 the internet'. This scene is one of many that highlight 'the triviality of the ways in which people benefit from these data networks' (Neelufar 2019:16) in the face of its deleterious causes and effects. These are spelt out in consecutive 3D word art statements:

'the internet is not universal'

'the internet is not in the clouds'

'it lies on the ocean floor'

'SUBMARINE FIBRE OPTIC CABLE NETWORK'

Between its satellite view and deep ocean, the video work evokes a religious scope to mimic the omnipotence aspired to by internet surveillance, as well as the clout big tech companies generate by mystifying their operations (Neelufar 2019). Rezaire demystifies, casting a segment of fibre optic cable as the 'white bunny' that we follow down from the heavens into the ocean, where we are taken on a CGI journey through an ocean trench. Silhouette overlay is used to affect the phenomenon of hyperlinking, where an icon or word contains a whole other webpage, articulating navigation of space within cyberspace protocols (Sadar 1995). A silhouette of either a brain cross section or coral hosts a rotation of CGI videos, including a cable laying ship (fig 6). A brass nautical frame populates the right-hand side of the panoramic scene, (fig 6) containing a map of trade routes, soon revealed to be both slave trade routes and maps of these fibre optic cables transmitting the internet's data. Rather than being a liberatory tool heralding a levelling of power, the internet reifies existing power relations (Rezaire 2017). Dubbing internet cables the 'hardware of new imperialism' (fig 6), Rezaire reveals both their geographic location and their location on the colonial and corporate nexus of geopolitical power.

Figure 5: Rezaire T *Deep Down Tidal* [still] artists' Vimeo

Figure 6: Rezaire T *Deep Down Tidal* [still] artists' Vimeo

Rezaire casts suspicion over the term 'globalisation' and its implied neutrality, the sermon-cum- lecture voiceover stating that 'the information revolution has become a veil for cultural westernization'. The reoccurring use of virtual worlds and avatars gestures to what is referred to as 'web 2', which emphasizes interactivity and portends to counter the passivity of earlier forms of the internet and indeed the broadcast television satirized by Ant Farm. Withstanding its shonky premise, this promise depends on access to the internet which, as Rezaire points out in her 2014 essay, *Afro Cyber Resistance: South African Internet Art,* is not universal. Citing that 'in some African countries the Internet reaches less than 1% of the population, mainly because of the lack of affordable and accessible Internet' while 'active Social network users represent only 7% of the continent', Rezaire exposes the way 'western hegemonic thought slithers its influence into the global collective mind' (Neelufar 2019:15): through the exclusion of people from the global south from these platforms and channels that are made possible by the exploitation of natural and human resources in the global south (Ajl 2020). The supposedly comprehensive and representative data set of the internet is accessed and contributed to by portions of the global population geopolitically contingent.

The ubiquity of media facilitated by the camera, television and the internet equates to a certain redundancy of location. This redundancy is contingent upon the conversion of meaning from presence into information. Ant Farm emphasize this transition in *Media Burn* by consigning the experience of their cataclysm predominantly to pixels on a screen. Hoch pioneered photomontage to infer the camera's ability to remix portions of the world a century before Rezaire's highly refined digital incarnation of the technique was mobilized to track the data journey of data – from the camera to the screen – along routes that follow both the hardware (infrastructure) and the software (ideology) of the technology of imperialism.

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