

In and Around: Cultures of Design and the Design of Cultures

Part I

By Andrew Blauvelt

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The paradoxical nature of being both in and around is familiar to the cultural anthropologist, who might work in the field among the observed and at the same time remains apart from the observed. It is this observer status given to the anthropologist that creates this necessary dilemma. The conventional wisdom supporting the role of cultural anthropology has been its intention to study the cultures of other peoples as a way of reflecting on our own culture, or to borrow a phrase from Liberal Humanism, "To know others so that we may better understand ourselves." The situation between an observer and an observed can never be neutral, however, since the power relationships are inevitably unequal.

The graphic designer shares a similar dilemma of being both instrumental in the making of cultural artifacts and living in the society through which they are distributed. Graphic designers are often asked to remove themselves from their social positions and experiences and offer themselves as professionals, specialists in the various forms of visual communication. This detachment, which we might call "professionalization" or "specialization," creates the mythical, autonomous observer in the design process. This is a learned method of being professional and a consequence of the "problem-solving process" at the core of every graphic design procedure. We are asked to be objective and to render rational decisions (solutions), and doing so places graphic design on a par with other professions.

The graphic designer is, of course, a member of society and thus lives with the artifacts of his or her making, as well as with the artifacts of other designers. In this way, designers are asked to be professionals outside of (to be around) culture, and at the same time, to be a part of (to be in), culture.

We are, with others in society, witnesses to and participants in the consumption of cultural artifacts and, therefore, share in the moments of seduction and repulsion that these artifacts generate.

I am seduced by the messages of others
I appreciate the materiality of the finely printed book
I respond to the urgency expressed by the political poster ... and I shop at the mall.

I am repulsed by the messages of others
I am appalled by displays of injustice
I am threatened by the signs of hatred ... and I shop at the mall.

The important lesson of this confession is that we consume cultural artifacts and their messages in different ways. While we consume these artifacts in the conventional manner of conspicuous consumption, which renders consumers as passive, blank slates upon which all forms of messages can be written, more recent research efforts have demonstrated another dimension to this idea of passive consumption, showing that we also consume artifacts symbolically and even ironically through small acts of individual resistance.(1) I watch Melrose Place ironically, for the melodramatic plot lines and the obvious acting - it's so bad, it's good - while I resist buying cable television because that's just too much television.

The Discovery of Difference

The dilemma of being both in and around culture exists at another level: at the level of individual subjectivity. I have already asserted that the phrase "in and around" constitutes a subject position, if only a paradoxical one. Just as a subject position will only be meaningful if it is defined in relationship to other positions, so too is the subject of that positioning. We need other things to mark the boundaries of ourselves, our identities and our cultures. Psychoanalysis tells us that this process happens at a very early age, when the child recognizes itself as a self; that is to say, as an individual, and also recognizes others as others. Similarly, cognitive psychologists have suggested that we seem predisposed at the earliest ages to recognize difference, the exceptional, as a way of making sense of the world around us.

This process of differentiation continues on a social level through identification with race, ethnicity, gender, age, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, class, etc. These social and cultural positions are defined as much by what they are not as by what they are. We find that we are culturally constructed as subjects and we are socially constructed through the identities we claim or the categories we are placed in. It is easier to understand that class is a social construction but harder to consider how race is a construction, and not simply a natural phenomenon, until we realize that the idea of race emerged in a historically specific way, bolstered by the truth claims of science for various political ends. Race is not natural, it is cultural. Gender is not natural, it is cultural. These statements are made to counter the extent to which ideas about woman, blacks, gays, etc. are so intertwined in the fabric of society as to appear inevitable and unquestionable - natural.

The relationship between self and others is a two-way street, producing effects on all parties within a power structure that is typically unequal. This "discovery," of others - that moment of first contact between different groups and their subsequent relationships - has been characterized by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida as

essentially "violent": "... the anthropological war [is] the essential confrontation that opens communication between peoples and cultures, even when that communication is not practiced under the banner of colonial or missionary oppression."(2)

This violence occurs at the level of actual, lived experience and at the level of symbolic existence, through words and images; i.e., representations.

Design's relationship with cultural identification is a very important, that is to say, financially significant one. The "discovery" of various cultural groups within society coincides with their definition as an audience and as a market. It is no coincidence that Big Business "discovered" other audiences after the social turmoil of the 1950s and 1960s; the Civil Rights and Women's Rights Movements to name but two. We are, in fact, witnessing a renewed discovery of cultural diversity under the banner of multiculturalism, a phenomenon that is reflected in "progressive" advertising campaigns.(3) Tellingly, many of these campaigns are for fashion clientele, contributing to the notion that such "diversity" is "fashionable."(4) In our discussions of others in this culture, it is hard to imagine a scenario that is not a product of larger economic forces. This applies to the economic development of colonialism that brought slavery to the New World and with it the foundations of racial supremacy, as well as to today's effects of global capitalism which turn those old feelings of supremacy into longings for contact, even intimate contact, with others - their skin, clothes, language, music, crafts, cuisine.(5) It is this longing for contact with others, their exotic appeal, which drives the desire for cultural appreciation through cultural appropriation.

Imaging the Other: The Digital Fiction of First Contact

This "discovery" of cultural difference through the recent guise of multiculturalism can be seen in a fall 1993 issue of Time magazine entitled "The New Face of America." Created as a special issue and devoted exclusively to issues surrounding what we now call "multiculturalism," this publication effort was sponsored, exclusively, by Chrysler Plymouth Corporation. From the cover: "Take a good look at this woman. She was created by a computer from a mix of several races. What you see is a remarkable preview of The New Face of America. How Immigrants Are Shaping the World's First Multicultural Society." We learn inside that this new woman is a composite creature created through the digital "morphing" process combining specified amounts of ethnicity: 15% Anglo-Saxon, 17.5% Middle Eastern, 17.5% African, 7.5% Asian, 35% Southern European, and 7.5% Hispanic. Least we consider her some sort of ethno-techno-Frankenstein, we are told that this woman stole the hearts of several magazine staffers, obviously unaware of her virtual existence. Of course, it doesn't take a cynic to realize the fallacy of asserting

that today's America represents the world's first multicultural society. The history of the world's oppressed would say otherwise. Even though the issue contains a story on interracial marriage and what it calls "crossbreeding," complete with real husbands and wives and their real mixed-race children, it expends a great deal of effort in the presentation of its digital ethnic-mixing "times table" shown in the next spread. Using the same "morphing" technology as the cover creation, they have assembled 49 others using a 50-50 mixing formula.

In a similar vein, the magazine *Colors* sponsored by the Italian fashion corporation Benetton, in a spring/summer 1993 issue devoted to race, offers a six-page section of digital "possibilities." In these pages, celebrities are transformed, much like Ted Turner's colorizing technique, creating a "black" Queen Elizabeth, a "black" Arnold Schwarzenegger, a "white" Spike Lee, an "Asian" Pope John Paul II and a "white" Michael Jackson. The absurdity of these "possibilities" as reality creates the humor that makes us laugh. These possibilities do not represent any lived reality but a mythic realm where we can now dissolve the outward boundaries of "us and them"-ness through the wonders of digital imaging.

Our fascination with others has been rethought by anthropologist Michael Taussig, who turns the table on the observer and the observed. Taussig asks "Who is fascinated by what?" when he questions early anthropological expeditions and their use of the camera and the phonograph to make contact with and record other peoples. According to Taussig, "the more important question lies with the white man's fascination with the non-whites' fascination with these mimetically capacious machines [the camera and the phonograph]." (6) Similarly, we need to ask ourselves who is served by the wondrous potential of digital imaging to transform pictures of race, ethnicity or gender? Who are these images for?

"The shock of recognition! In an electric information environment, minority groups can no longer be contained - ignored. Too many people know too much about each other. Our new environment compels commitment and participation. We have become irrevocably involved with, and responsible for, each other."

The Medium is the Massage, Marshall McLuhan & Quentin Fiore, 1967

Over a quarter-century has passed since this prophecy about our technological relationship with others by media guru Marshall McLuhan. In the racial turbulence of the sixties, McLuhan saw the impact that increased information exchange would have on society, particularly on our relationships with other people. Tinged with the optimism that pervades all technological revolutions, McLuhan injects a message of civic responsibility - an ethics of mutual dependency.

Fast-forward to yesterday: "Our critics felt that Matt Mahurin's work changed the picture fundamentally; I felt it lifted a common police mug shot to the level of art, with no sacrifice to truth. Reasonable people may disagree about that. If there was anything wrong with the cover, in my view, it was that it was not immediately apparent that this was a photo-illustration rather than an unaltered photograph; to know that, a reader had to turn to our contents page or see the original mug shot on the opening page of the story."

James R. Gaines, Managing Editor, Time, July 4, 1994

This statement was a defense for the use of Matt Mahurin's digital photo-illustration of O.J. Simpson for Time. This recent event underscores the relationships among electronic technologies, representation and cultural identity and the many issues their convergence raises. There are many instances in recent memory of the manipulation of photographic imagery by digital technology, such as the head-of-Oprah-Winfrey + body-of-Ann-Margaret collage for T.V. Guide or National Geographic's shifting of the Great Pyramids at Giza, which stirred numerous public controversies over the myth of "the truthfulness of photographs." (7)

In the case of the O.J. Simpson cover, Time decides to use as its defense the argument that the illustration transcends the original mug shot photo and becomes art, thereby placing it in a special cultural category reserved for suspended judgments, a place where my taste is not yours, yours is not mine, let's agree to disagree and other relativisms that seemed to have been inherited from the "I'm Okay, You're Okay" '70s. By placing this commission in the realm of art, the editor can argue that the artist who created it (or rather re-created it) gave it something it lacked. This lack occurs, of course, because of the kind of image it is - a mug shot. Justification for Mahurin's image hinges on displacing everything we know about the social significance of mug shots as documents of suspected criminals and re-reading the image as an intervention of the artist's hand and eye, thereby elevating the commonplace mug shot to the extraordinary realm of art.

The greater at-large and largely negative reaction to this image occurs at a level of understanding about how images are conceptually framed in society. According to Time management, detractors didn't read the image "correctly" as a work of art, but rather as what it is, a technological alteration of a mug shot - a photographic document of criminal surveillance. (8) What was read, at least by some, was the darkening of Simpson's skin tone, which shows that some grasped the fact that this was not the "original" because it did not conform to what they knew (mostly from other pictures) about O.J. Simpson. It did not correspond to the "truth." The reinscription of a police mug shot, #BK4013970 06-17-94, into the red frame of a Time cover, trades our abstract belief in "innocent until proven guilty" for the tacit knowledge of assumed guilt. The resulting re-creation mixes several other social messages: the story of a fallen public figure ("An American Tragedy," reads the

cover) subconsciously translated in many minds as the verification of everything they think they know of black males and criminal activity.

This mini-controversy is but the latest episode in the on-going struggle for representation in our culture that is dressed in the high-tech clothing of digital imaging, while revealing the same old social truths. McLuhan saw a social opportunity but lacked critical insight into the social reality that limits individual options that seek to operate in opposition to established social truths.

What is interesting to me is how new digital technologies have been harnessed for representing racial "possibilities." These ethnic fictions populate the world of cyberspace in ways that picturing others used to reside in the mind, moving away from imagining the other to imaging the other. Unfortunately, little has changed in the conceptions of race, only the spaces in which they are articulated. The representations of other cultures have moved from the conspicuous colonialism of stolen and bartered objects found in the curiosity cabinet and the natural history museum to the neocolonialism of appropriating cultural representations, including the creation of yet another "other:" a fictive one you can't know because it doesn't really exist.

It is this aspect of fictitiousness that distinguishes the use of digital imaging techniques to capture and fix the image of the other. Photography has been consistently used to "capture" others, particularly in the field work of anthropologists or the surveillance of police. These photographic depictions have their own level of conceit but always remain true to their claim to capture reality "as it was." These recent uses of digital imaging techniques, however, relinquish their claims to reality in favor of picturing reality "as it isn't," or "as it might be."

The fictive domain of the digital construction can be seen more obviously in another *Colors* (June 1994) depiction, a portrait of former President Ronald Reagan with skin lesions next to an obituary citing his recent death from complications with AIDS. The fictitious photo and obituary rewrite the Reagan-era policy on AIDS and extol the virtues of a man who "is best remembered for his quick and decisive response to the AIDS epidemic," under the headline "Hero." While at great pains to establish a level of reality for their story, *Colors* declares the fictitious nature of the story in a footnote and uses the word "manipulation" in the attached photo credit. These are offered to prevent misreading the story as true, while trying to preserve the supreme irony of the story itself. Again, the absurdity of the story plays havoc with the reality of its presentation. Unfortunately, we are left with the "wishful thinking" of the obituary and the all-too-real historical record on the subject.

The fictive fantasy of digital "possibilities" seems so appealing because they offer us a form of pleasure through their refusal of a known reality.(9) The ease with which

such productions are made is in contrast to the difficulties of easing racial conflict or ending political apathy towards the AIDS pandemic.

As a counterpoint to these instrumental uses of digital technologies by mainstream media is the use of similar technologies by British artist Keith Piper, whose video installation "Surveillances: Tagging the Other," deals with the use of that technology within the climate of European racism. Piper appropriates the slang term of "tagging" - the marking of territory by a unique graffiti signature - and applies it to the use of electronic technologies to mark and track others. In this way, Piper shows how, for example, a proposed New European State could utilize digital technologies and information networks to target social "undesirables" and keep them under surveillance. Piper's digital images foresee a distinctly 21st-century vision of documenting and analyzing cultural differences in much the same way as 19th-century phrenologists studied the head structures and facial features of others, particularly the insane, the criminal and the "Negro." Keith Piper's use of the same technology creates a different digital fiction: one you fear because it might just exist.

Picturing Difference / Representing Diversity

We come to know ourselves and others less often through actual contact and more usually through representations in society. Cultural identification is a factor of representation. For example, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, speaking about the concepts of woman and sexuality, said it succinctly: "Images and symbols for the woman cannot be isolated from images and symbols of the woman. It is representation, the representation of feminine sexuality... which conditions how it comes into play."(10)

The debates about multiculturalism are debates about representation. Although many people consider the issue in terms of sheer numbers - a quantitative approach to representation - the issue is not necessarily a lack of representations but the diversity of them; for as the art critic and theorist Craig Owens reminds us: "In our culture there is, of course, no lack of representations of women - or, for that matter, of other marginalized groups (blacks, homosexuals, children, criminals, the insane...)."(11)

Representations can be depictions of others as a kind of shorthand that we substitute for specific cultural categories. The effect of the linkage between dominant political interests and the use of various representations can be seen when we confront wholesale categories that are themselves amalgamations of sex, race and class, without imagery. For example, what image do you form for "welfare mother," "crack addict," or "AIDS patient?" These code words are the cultural

shorthand for young, unmarried, poor, African-American woman; young, poor, African-American man; and young, white, gay male respectively. Their power derives from their ability to exploit media images of these scenarios in the minds of the public without directing attention to their misogynic, racist and homophobic roots.

Picture This: Voice and Agency

The debate on representation for the graphic designer seems to reside in the space between Karl Marx's empowering dictate, "They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented,"(12) that is to say, act for others, and Gilles Deleuze's categorical rejection of such presumed authority - "the indignity of speaking for others."(13) Marx's famous dictate is the more typical task that artists and other cultural producers have assigned themselves: to speak for others. Less typical is the statement by Deleuze that suggests, perhaps, letting others speak for themselves.

The negotiation of representational strategies seems central for the graphic designer (and others) who are routinely asked to speak for others. Graphic designers and other cultural producers are just beginning to rethink the terms of representation, away from speaking for others and towards speaking with and to others.(14) The factors that would allow others to speak for themselves deal with access to the means of representation that is ultimately a function of power. The debates around multiculturalism can be seen as a struggle for control over the means of representation. As Craig Owens states, it is representation itself that takes away the ability to speak for oneself.

However, the traffic in representations will not end since it is fundamental to the operation of our society. So, while increased instances of represented others (tokenism) inject some presence into the picture, they do little to explain the previous exclusions. Fundamental change is unlikely to occur through the pages of multinational corporate advertising no matter how many others are depicted. After all, have you "Come a Long Way, Baby!"?

Fundamental change is much more likely to come at a broader social level through a multitude of changes from any number of sectors and inevitably it will be reflected in the construction of various representations, made by graphic designers and other cultural producers and ultimately incorporated in the constitution of identities. After all, corporate advertising campaigns and token representatives (spot the black, the Asian, the woman in the scene) do not create diversity but merely reflect it.

The work of socially engaged activists, artists and designers tries to undermine the stereotype in innumerable ways; through disruptive strategies such as appropriation, subversion and inversion, as well as the destabilizing tactics of deconstructive textual readings and demystifying widely held views.(15) True inclusiveness, as a result of empowerment or agency, includes access to both the means of producing cultural representations and to the modes of their distribution in society. In this way, the voices of others will be heard only when those others have access to the larger public sphere.

While graphic designers may claim an independent status, like that of neutral observers, we find that their role is a central one in the system of representations. As producers and consumers of various cultural artifacts, understood as both tangible goods, such as books and magazines, as well as the more intangible products, such as ephemeral messages and images, graphic designers find themselves both in and around culture.

So what is the answer? The problems are multifaceted and much larger than design, which means we need a variety of responses on a variety of levels. It helps to remember that we are both designers and citizens. In this way, you can be part of the solution even if you are not designing for it. It also helps to remember that graphic design is about messages, and that our solutions are merely contributions to a larger effort.

There must be greater cultural diversity in the people who design, including an analysis of why these people are not there now. We need greater critical awareness that the teaching and practice of design occur in larger social frameworks, governed by rules of racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, etc., particularly for those individuals who may not experience it themselves. We need a greater range of methods and options for practicing graphic design that begins to step outside of a reactionary response to problems with its outmoded, pyramidal (top-down) structure and towards a more inclusive, responsive position found in activities like, for example, collaboration and co-authorship. Much to the disappointment of many, these issues will not disappear with dismissals of "political correctness" since they reflect a fundamental social change that has been underway for quite some time, no matter how slow it seems in coming for the rest of us. Quite simply, design has no choice but to get used to it.

Notes

1. The now classic example drawn from work of popular culture is Ien Ang's *Watching Dallas*, first published in the Netherlands in 1982. Ang gathered responses from women by placing an ad in the Dutch woman's magazine *Viva*, addressed to those who either liked to watch the American soap opera *Dallas* or disliked it. Ang discovered three general positions toward the program: one group of fans, a second set of viewers who watched the program ironically and a third group who hated the show. Ang's work demonstrates that the consumption of cultural artifacts (in this case watching t.v.) is a complex negotiation involving sometimes the wholesale acceptance of the show's message (by fans), sometimes an outright rejection of such debased messages and meanings (by haters) and sometimes an inverted re-reading of the show's message and meaning (by ironists). Ang's work is important because she examines how pleasure is produced through consumption, in rather complex ways with contradictory value systems, rather than seeing consumption as simply an end in and of itself.

2. "The Battle of Proper Names," from "Part II: Nature, Culture, Writing" in *Of Grammatology* by Jacques Derrida, 1976, p.107. Derrida's comment is in context of a discussion of the "Writing Lesson" by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. The linkage between violence and representation is fully present in this allegorical image of "America" by Philippe Galle in the late 16th century. The New World is rendered as a naked, violent woman. Why a naked, violent woman?

3. The advent of "multi-culti" advertising has produced a bewildering amount of information on the consumptive preferences and buying patterns of various ethnic groups. For example, we now know that Korean Americans consume more Spam than any other ethnic group or that Chinese Americans drink more Cognac. In the words of one executive, "Today's marketing is part anthropology."

4. The most visible of these campaigns is the on-going "United Colors of Benetton." A critical analysis of Benetton is made by Jeff Rosen in his article "Merchandising Multiculturalism: Benetton and the New Cultural Relativism," *New Art Examiner*, November 1993, pp.18-26. The critical difference lies in how the concept of multiculturalism will be allowed to exist as a force in society. Will multiculturalism act as a force for substantive change in how we deal with other cultures? Is it to be seen as a form of marginalized pluralism? Or is it simply a relative concept perfect for the marketing of our times? In the reported words of Benetton's creative director Oliviero Toscani, "Products change, images capitalize." Or as Rosen notes, "Toscani has it backwards: Images change, products capitalize."

5. "The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture." - bell hooks from "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 1992, p. 21.

6. "The Talking Machine," in *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* by Michael Taussig, 1993, p. 198.

7. For an extended account of what he calls the "pseudo-photograph," see William J. Mitchell's book *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (1992); in particular, the chapters "Intention and Artifice" and "How to Do Things with Pictures."

8. For a critical account of the use of photography in the service of documenting criminal activity, see "The Body and the Archive" by Allan Sekula, reprinted in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, 1989.

9. This thought parallels some of the conclusions of Ien Ang (see note 1), who argues that fantasy and fiction do not "function in place of, but beside, other dimensions of life (social practice, moral or political consciousness). "It...is a source of pleasure because it puts 'reality' in parentheses, because it constructs imaginary solutions for real contradictions, which in their fictional simplicity and their simple fictionality step outside the tedious complexity of existing social relations of dominance and subordination." (p.135)

10. "Guiding Remarks for a Congress on Feminine Sexuality," by Jacques Lacan in *Feminine Sexuality*, edited by Juliet Mitchell, 1982, p. 90.

11. "'The Indignity of Speaking for Others': An Imaginary Interview," by Craig Owens in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*, 1992, p. 262.

12. The comment is from Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* in a discussion of the French peasantry. This is discussed by Owens (see note 10), who adds: "Here, Marx uncritically assumes the traditional role of politically motivated intellectual - or artist - in bourgeois society: he appropriates for himself the right to speak on behalf of others, setting himself up as their conscience - indeed, as consciousness itself. But in order to occupy this position, he must first deny them (self-) consciousness, the ability to represent themselves." (p.261).

13. Michel Foucault, "Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, 1977, p.209. This statement by Deleuze about Foucault's work comes from Craig Owens's essay (see note 10).

14. Undoubtedly, designers are discovering that issues of cultural diversity and social responsibility can be found in their own back yards. As I write this, the premiere issue of *Sphere* has arrived at my door, a publication by the World Studio Foundation. The stated intent of the Foundation is threefold: to "examine the role of cultural identity in the design disciplines," to "collect and disseminate information about social projects in the global creative community" and to "encourage projects that empower individuals and communities to participate in the shaping of their environment." While their intentions are laudable I am left with an uneasy feeling. Perhaps it's cynicism, maybe it's the *Colors*-like design that makes me suspicious, or maybe it's the \$50 subscription price. See the brief report on World Studio, *I.D. magazine*, November 1993, p. 26.

15. It is easier to see the work produced by artists as instances of "others speaking for themselves" and in the process enabling another voice to be heard. I think of Carrie Mae Weems, and African-American woman, whose photographic series "Ain't Jokin" with titles such as "Black Woman with Chicken" or "What are the three things you can't give a black person?" or of the Native-American artist Jimmie Durham's work, both of whom undermine the prevalent stereotypes produced by and for dominant culture. It is harder to see this activity in the realm of graphic design proper, much of which is produced by and for dominant cultural interests.