

DRAWN IDENTITIES: Pepsi, Shakers and Tattoos

First a Brief Note on Drawing

I no longer recognise much of a divide between writing and drawing, for me, the two travels hand in hand towards very similar goals.

Leonardo's drawing books contain as many words as images, probably more, when words failed him, images took over and when an image didn't do the job his pen moved on to shape words in support.

Both writing and drawing involve the translation of multidimensional events and concepts into readable two-dimensional matter. In the case of drawing, directions and instructions are turned into lines, volume into contours, sounds into shapes, shadows into tone, colors into words and words into marks. Marks that can be drawn using sets of established conventions, built from on-the-spot improvisations, or constructed from a combination of the two. In the case of writing and as it happens Morse code the entire world is translated into lines and dots.

Identities

However complex our identities seem, most of us have just one passport, and as a result one identity. Some have two, but any more than that we know from the movies usually means trouble. We are born with: racial, ethnic and national identities, family names, dates of birth, finger prints, footprints, retinas that can be scanned and DNA that can be swabbed. Some of these identifying features we can wrestle with, with pencil and paper in the life room, the rest are too subtle, too complex or too difficult to pin down in that way.

We travel through life with: a birth certificate, a given name, and what were known on the old UK passport as distinguishing features. After those primaries we have: height, weight and a hair color, a postal address, various ID, photographs, a signature, pin numbers and bar codes that as time progresses we update. All of these are designed, in one way or another to establish and act as proof of our identities.

At no point in our lives are we more aware of the importance of being able to establish proof of our identity than when we cross a regulated boarder. This easily measurable side of our identity, the side that post 9/11, government agencies call biometrics, is what we now use to authenticate identity. At a governmental level the art of recognition is now software driven, it is the scan-able, match-able, digitally stored images and data not the memory of a time serving policeman that today will detect a forgery and catch a thief. Artists I suspect are less interested in, facial recognition software national security and fraud than they are in the intangible, the difficult to measure and the constructed. Identities need not after all- is for

life, they can as any brand advisor, crook or member of the clandestine service tell you manipulated, reconstructed and fabricated.

At this point it may be worth reflecting on what we remember of the stories of some artists lives: Duchamp, Dali and Warhol, all make interesting reading, each I suspect was fully in control of their “Brand” identity.

Pepsi, Shakers and Tattoos

Writing and drawing doesn't have to be all tied up in schools, pens, pencils and paper, you can write and draw just about anywhere, with, just about anything. You can work with a needle in flesh, a diamond on glass even an aircraft in the sky. What's good about taking writing and drawing on this kind of excursion is that the medium becomes an active carrier, it no longer sits in the background as a probability, and it gets involved in actively constructing meaning. If for example we take the phrase Drink Pepsi-Cola and tattoo it onto someone's forehead, then engraved it onto a mirror and finally write it into a perfect blue sky, each time as you re-read the phrase written into its new location and medium its meaning is conditioned by that context.

Vaporizing fluid in a plane's exhaust system to form a white trail creates skywriting. Flying at about ten thousand feet the pilot uses the plane as a drawing instrument to complete an image that is usually five to ten miles across. During the 1930's Pepsi-Cola became the first corporation to write its name “onto” the skies of America. It is said that the campaign was so effective that incredulous people would sometimes phone the company to tell them that God had written the name of their product in the sky.

This is how the branding of Pepsi - Cola started and its identity, as a fresh

all American product was established. A red plane in a blue sky leaving a white vapour trail that gave the impression of having arrived, just like the clouds in the sky, by virtue of the hand of God.

Two hundred years before the Pepsi campaign got under way the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing established a community in Manchester, England. By 1774 the "Shakers", as they became known, had relocated under the guidance of their spiritual leader Anne Lee to rural New York. The Shakers were responsible for inventing: the spring clothes peg, rotary harrow, circular saw and wheel driven washing machine, they are best remembered today however, for their rational furniture design, loathing of art and celibacy. The former being the reason they are best remembered, the latter being all most certainly the cause of their demise.

Their views, not just on painting and drawing but all two dimensional imagery were unambiguously broadcast in an 1845 ordinance.

"No maps, charts and no pictures or paintings, shall ever be hung up in your dwelling-rooms, shops or offices. And no pictures or paintings set in frames, with glass before them, shall ever be among you."ⁱ

In spite of the ordinance, a small group of shakers made over a twenty-year period just short of 200 drawings. Various referred to in Shaker literature as: "sheets", "lines", "rewards", "presents" "gifts" and "tokens" any connection with drawing or art was studiously circumnavigated.

These images were completed by just 16 members of the sect between 1839 and 1859, on ordinary stationery in pen and ink, that was sometimes

coloured- in. Known not as artists or scribes but as “Instruments” the sixteen makers of these drawings, thirteen women and just three men were positioned within Shaker society as “conduits”. They were not expected to be thinking, imaginative people with personalities and identities that conditioned what they drew the expectation was that they were disinterested translators of messages from the spirit world. Sometimes translating their own ecstatic visions into two-dimensional images, more often the visions of others. Their drawings developed their appearance from the vernacular visual traditions of: needle point, quilting, family trees, Sunday school texts and home made maps. They were however neither made to decorate houses nor hang on walls, more likely they were intended to be kept as records and used as teaching aids in conjunction with the spoken word to retell stories and underscore the communities spiritual beliefs.

Both named and designed to circumnavigate the ordinance that forbade their making, each “Gift” set out to become a factual account of an experience or event. Each however was a failure, not because it told the story badly, but because as a free translation it failed to conceal the individuality, resourcefulness and identity of the maker. Authorship, I suspect, is most visible when the draftsman or draftswoman, is forced to improvise, while strictly adhering to a set of conventions authorship is masked. So it’s not simply that we know the names of the “ Instruments” who made these “Gifts” it is that there was no given or shared drawing convention they could either work within or hid behind. This resulted in the “ Instruments” unintentionally showing their hand and revealing something of their personality and identity beyond their name. Drawing is good at that.

When Paul Cezanne said, “The man must remain obscure. The pleasure must

be found in the work”, he was I suspect, trying to explain a belief many artists have, which is that their identity as artists is less involved with their physical appearance than the appearance of their work.

But what Cezanne hadn't foreseen was the degree to which a modern audience would have just as much interest in the identity of artists as the appearance of their art, a situation Warhol saw coming and elegantly summed up, “Don't pay any attention to what they write about you. Just measure it in inches”.

When the Mexican artist Freda Kahlo painted, *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana (Diego on My Mind)*, she went beyond just making a likeness and gave the audience an opportunity to reflect on the possibility that her identity was more than the product of her genetic make up, nurture and chosen career path, it was also her choice of primary partner. Married to the older and at the time infinitely more successful Diego Rivera, Kahlo clearly understood the degree to which her own identity and status as an artist was for better or worse linked to and conditioned by her artist husbands.

Her *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana* brings together two faces and two identities. The first and primary image is a likeness of herself dressed in regional Mexican costume, the second, an either ghostly or tattooed image of her husbands face, on her forehead. The sub title of the painting “ Diego on my mind” suggests Kahlo intended his “ presence” to be understood as a memory and not as it may first appear a tattoo. Her very simple solution to the very complex problem of going beyond appearances and the visible to establish absence or invisibility as a part of identity is to my mind impressive.

Tā moko (Maori tattoos) are carved like furrows into the flesh with uhi (bone chisels) they are mid way between drawings and carvings. In pre-European Māori culture all high-ranking persons received moko, as a part of their rights of passage and as a permanent indicator of social status and rank. Men generally received moko on their faces, buttocks and thighs, women on their lips and chins. Within Maori culture moko are the wearers ID and passport, beyond the confines of Maori culture they were most probably “read” as incomprehensible disfigurements or a some kind of “war paint”. The degree to which the complexity of the line drawings over rode or masked readings of facial expression and physiognomy will I suspect always remain something of a puzzle, but what they certainly serve to illustrate is the degree to which identity can be constructed and exist in layers. First the face, then the drawn on narrative, the “back story”.

In Maori culture male facial tattoos are made according to a strict sense of order. Although at first sight they appear symmetrical one side of the face is subtly different from the other, each side telling a different story. The left describes the wearers patriarchal ancestry, the right spells out the matriarchal half. Together they tell a story of descent. If on the father’s side there was no significant bloodline of either power, status or achievement the left side of the face would be left as a blank.

Prior to European first contact there was no history of drawing let alone pen and paper, the Maori wove and carved and as near as they got to producing anything that could be called drawing were the Ta Moko.

Probably the earliest surviving examples of pen and ink drawings made on paper by the Maori, are the drawings they made of their own faces, not of

their physical features but the linear patterns chiselled into the surface of their face, the Moko. Within the story of drawing these made from memory images, executed at the bottom of land deeds as proof of an individuals identity, are not simply signatures, they are also powerful reminders of the bond that exists between writing and drawing.

Ta moko however, the actual tattoos, are more complex than signatures. As drawings they are important because they have a living background, a background that's far from neutral. Working in partnership with the wearers physical appearance they produce a representation of identity that ties inheritance to appearance and past to present.

What connects each of the five examples I have chosen to illustrate this exploration of drawn identity is that apart from Kahlo they are not tied to high art and are instead drawn from everyday life.

Both the act of drawing and the business of conducting research into drawing can take an inquisitive person on an extraordinary journey. For me the journey included being taken by a Maori to a history museum in Auckland, writing about Shaker Drawings, whilst touching a drawing made in New Lebanon, New York, in the 1850's and finally, holding a pencil over a blank sheet of paper in my studio at Chelsea College of Art, trying to make sense of my identity as an artist and research professor, whilst remembering conversations, things seen and things read.

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