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VRA panel chaired by Barbara Brenny
Interloping Images: Expanding Access for Those Outside the Norm

March 12, 2008

Not Quite 2.0, but a Few Alternatives to Authority Lists and Controlled Vocabularies

I have to admit that I am a relative "newbie" to the Visual Resources Association and to the complexities of creating digital image collections. There are some heavy hitters here at VRA from some of the most prestigious institutions in the country, and by comparison, my project is quite modest. Sometimes I think I'm learning more than I need to about metadata and cataloging, and I'm certainly working slowly from the ground up. But I am intrigued by concepts of visual and media literacy, and as a university gallery director, I'm always trying to find ways to integrate art objects and artifacts into the undergraduate liberal arts curriculum at St. Lawrence. I'm also paying close attention to the ways in which technology affects pedagogy, and as we all know, the so-called Web 2.0 landscape is evolving rapidly.

I'd like to make a few comments before I describe the digital collection project that I'm working on. I offer these comments as an "interloper," and I love Barbara Brenny's choice of that term for the title of this panel today. "As one who interferes, intrudes, or gets involved where not welcome[1]," an interloper can act like a sort of *provocateur*, asking difficult questions and generally stirring up the pot. There's certainly a part of me that likes to challenge the status quo, but I do so here thoughtfully, I hope, and with good intentions.

A colleague of mine, Anne Cuyler Salsich, has been working this past year as an independent consultant to help the Gallery at SLU create its first online digital collection of

[1] Wiktionary definition, March 6, 2008.

photographs from our Permanent Collection. She was the one who steered me toward the good work of the VRA, and at her suggestion, I attended the Summer Educational Institute in Bloomington last summer.

Anne and I talk frequently about the importance of content and context when creating metadata to accompany images. She recently wrote an article for the Journal of Archival Organization entitled "Collaboration: Paradigm of the Digital Cultural Content Environment" in which she states, "Collaborative digital projects are a relatively new incarnation of the traditional museum or library exhibit, [often] involving the collaboration of several institutions to bring an array of works together for special consideration in a public sphere. Yet they are essentially different in so many ways as to become a new paradigm in presenting cultural heritage objects to the public." [2] She argues further that"visual sources require interpretation and context to render the complexities of their meaning" [and that] "collaboration on digitization projects must go beyond financial resource sharing to include involvement of experts in content areas for visual resources."[3]

As a person trained in history, the history of photography, and library and information science, Anne, in the process of creating metadata for the photographs in our collection, uncovered relevant facts and fascinating stories. She's made that collection come alive in ways I never expected or imagined. It was only through this process of creating metadata that we made new connections among photographs, revealing subjects and themes that were there the whole time, but hidden or not apparent as such. Perhaps many of you have experienced this before, but for me, it was transformative.

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[2] Journal of Archival Organization, Vol. 4 (3/4), 2006, 120.
[3] Ibid, 119.

Images are complex phenomena and despite my education and career in the visual arts, I still have a hard time defining exactly what people mean these days, in really tangible ways, by the notion of visual literacy. At St. Lawrence, and at other institutions, I presume, our University president, dean, and faculty talk seriously about assessment and outcomes. But *how do we measure what we see* and *how do we understand and evaluate what we see*, especially in relation to technology and media? I don't want to get too theoretical here, but I wonder how we will define learning goals, quantitatively and qualitatively, in terms of creating and analyzing images and in terms of thinking critically with visual texts? With those questions in mind, I'll move on to the body of my paper.

I've been using ContentDM for the past couple of years as a tool to automate the records for SLU's Permanent Collection and to help interested faculty create personal collections for teaching and research. For the faculty collections, I was drawn initially to a model of creating fields and metadata that I saw on the REALIA Project Web site. (This was before I knew about the VRA's Core 4.) The REALIA Project is a broadly based effort by faculty and students from four national consortia in higher education to provide what they call "Rich Electronic Archive for Language Instruction Anywhere," and which publishes faculty-reviewed digital media for the teaching and study of modern languages and cultures. They set up a list of requirements for Metadata Standards and Content Management that included a new metadata field that I'd never seen before called PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS. This image of the east German *trabant* is a good example of such a record. The contributor provides a concise description of the vehicle parked in front of a building, but in the PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS field, we learn a great deal more about the cultural and political significance of the vehicle than we would have using only the standard LC SUBJECT and DESCRIPTION fields.

Here is an excerpt from the REALIA page in the PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS field:

> "Image could be used to discuss East German culture and the fascination with the Trabi built between 1957 and 1991. The car has become a cult auto in post-reunification Germany and there are many Trabi rallies in Germany. The car was also the protagonist in the German comedy "Go, Trabi, Go!" This image could prompt discussion about nostalgia (Ostalgie) for East Germany and the conflicts between East Germans and West Germans following reunification."[4]

It is this sort of content and context that I find especially useful, as it provides another access point for the viewer, one that is a little richer and more sophisticated, in my opinion.

For my project, I took the concept of PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS, modified it somewhat, and have now incorporated it into a unique research collection of contemporary sticker art and ephemera. Before going too much further showing you that, I need to explain stickers and the sticker phenomenon briefly. Art stickers are a fairly recent form of street art and graffiti, in which artists create small, often cheaply made, one-of-a-kind or printed images and texts and post them on every imaginable surface of the built environment. Stickers are found predominantly in urban centers all over the world. Unlike some forms of graffiti, stickers seem to function under the radar until you actually see or read about them. Once you do come across them, however, they are ubiquitous. I first noticed stickers by chance in 2003 in east Berlin while walking around in some of the more alternative, artsy neighborhoods. One can find them all over in similar sorts of neighborhoods in New York's Chelsea district, Soho, and the lower east side, for example.

[4] http://realiaproject.org/

Stickers are by their very nature ephemeral and last for a few days or weeks until they are ripped off, washed off, or covered over by other stickers and street art. Sticker art also has a very strong presence on the Web, though typically, stickers are represented in a photo-documentary fashion on Flickr or in personal blogs. People photograph stickers as a means of documenting a trip or following a particular artist's work from city to city. Aside from overtly political stickers, portraiture and signature stickers are among the most common forms of expression, whereby artists are engaged in a tireless D-I-Y form of self-promotion. In the blocks around this conference hotel, I've seen a bunch of these signature stickers, mostly on newspaper boxes along the street.

Artists often use stickers as a means of "tagging" a public space, making it their own, at least temporarily, much like traditional graffiti artists who spray paint their names in big bubble letters to claim the side of a building, wall, train, or subway. It's a way of saying, "I was here. I own this space, for now." Flickr collections also provide a way of "tagging" images, in which an online global community of viewers can discuss and tag sticker photographs with their own sets of keywords. Such folksonomic projects, those which incorporate user-generated content or metadata, often serve ironically to subvert elaborate structures of "authority terms" and "controlled vocabularies" that are used for traditional institutional digital image collections. In both cases, such tagging could be labeled as a form of "culture jamming," a term which refers to the process of transforming and subverting the conventions of mass media and mainstream culture.

Unlike the online digital photo-documentary collections that one finds on Flickr, my sticker project is the only one that I know of which functions as an online digital database with individual stickers scanned and cataloged. I've now acquired (or liberated, as some would say) a

few thousand stickers from several major cities in North America and Europe, including New York City, Berlin, Toronto, Los Angeles, and Budapest, with the help of my colleagues, students, alumni, and good friends. To date, the digital sticker collection includes over 500 items in ContentDM.

In this next section, I want to focus again on the concepts of content, context, and collaboration that I talked about before. In addition to collecting, archiving, and cataloging stickers, I'm now doing more in-depth research on their cultural and socio-political content and context. I gave a paper on this research at the Annual College Art Association Conference in Dallas last month entitled "Takin' it to the Street and Stickin' it to the Man: Political and Cultural Resistance in Contemporary Sticker Art." I'm also developing a collaborative model in which I invite others to comment on one or more stickers or sets of stickers. Such a model echoes what we do in the Gallery when we invite artists, scholars, faculty, and students to interpret and contextualize works of art for exhibition text panels and exhibition cards. As such, exhibitions are highly collaborative endeavors. Similarly, a digital collection of any sort can provide endless options for analysis, reflection, comparison, and the like. Ultimately, rather than inviting experts to contribute to the project, I hope to offer this collection in a format that allows other users to do the same.

I'll now share some of the contributions that I've solicited from a variety of sources, material that I have placed in the PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS field that I described earlier.

In this first set of images of stickers from Germany, I asked a colleague, David Arensburg, to research and write about a selection of provocative *antifa* stickers, and I share this

excerpt to provide an example of the potential for rich and substantive metadata that can accompany a digital collection project.

> "Historically, German fascist and anti-fascist organizations have functioned like protons and electrons in an atom. One group, *antifa* (derived from the German *Antifaschismus*), is a loosely organized confederation that has made its presence known since the mid-1990s via graffiti covering remnants of the Berlin Wall and with large, illustrated posters reminiscent of Weimar-era graphics. More recently, *antifa* stickers incorporate imagery and slogans appropriated from the media, popular culture, historical events, and national landmarks, in an agitprop campaign against neo-fascist and neo-Nazi organizations and activities. One sticker depicts a US B-17 bomber from World War II with a caption that roughly translates as, "*Bomber Harris, do it again. But once again, let's finally do it right*." Bomber Harris, or Sir Arthur Travers Harris, was the RAF Commander-in-Chief credited with implementing strategic bombing over urban civilian centers. Elsewhere in the *antifa* stickers, we see pop culture-based images of Simpsons' characters chasing the police with Molotov cocktail, club, and wrench and Lisa Simpson flipping the bird; as well as Clint Eastwood's "Dirty Harry" brandishing a 44 Magnum; "Tank Girl" from the 1995 movie with the same title; and cartoon figures including the Hulk, Yosemite Sam, and Calvin (from *Calvin and Hobbes*)."[5]

Next, I will discuss a selection of US stickers. While examining the subjects and content of some of these stickers, it's clear that a conceptual dialogue is shared among artists who live continents apart. Yet similar images assume different cultural and political meanings as they are presented in different physical environments and cultural/political contexts. For instance, the Star Wars "AT-AT walker," signifying the threat of fascism in the German sticker, differs from an imperialist interpretation of that same image—this time with an American flag—on a sticker found in NYC's lower east side. Dr. Jill Walker from the University of Bergen in Norway

[5] See http://gallery.stlawu.edu and click on browse under "The Gallery Has A Posse."

describes this as a form of "distributed narrative," in which time, space, and authorship are not unified, but rather what she characterizes as being as "across media, through the network, and … in the physical spaces that we live in."[6]

This next set of stickers, "I own you. Turn it off." and "iDon't. Are you an iChimp?," comment ironically on pervasive media control. In the first sticker, a generic television set talks back, and in the second, the corporate iCampaign is subverted and exhorts us to "Just say no." While most people will recognize the iPrefix on any term or phrase, some won't, and it can be useful and effective in a case like this to provide smart metadata in addition to more basic subject and description fields.

A St. Lawrence University professor in the Global Studies department, John Collins, wrote about the next two stickers, among others, based on his own areas of research and expertise.

> "Media institutions do not have 100 percent control over anyone's ideas; we always have some room to maneuver even as our ideas are being shaped by our location in a mediated world. At the same time, the case of Fox News—which systematically participated in the Bush administration's disinformation campaign in the months leading up to the launching of the Iraq war—suggests that we should not underestimate the ability of media institutions to shape "reality" when working in combination with governmental and other powerful institutions. The use of the phrase "mind control" in this sticker, therefore, is a way of calling attention to the ideological role of the mainstream corporate news media in taking aggressive, militaristic policies and rendering them more acceptable in the eyes of the general population."[7]

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[6] Walker, Dr. Jill. "Distributed Narratives: Telling Stories Across Networks." Presented at AoIR 5.0, Brighton, September 21, 2004.

[7] See http://gallery.stlawu.edu and click on browse under "The Gallery Has A Posse."

John Collins also wrote about a powerful three-inch square sticker called "Porno," which juxtaposes an image of Saddam Hussein after he was captured by US troops in 2003 and the other of a woman with a finger in her mouth.[8] Collins notes,

> "Saddam Hussein has long occupied an oddly sexualized position in the discourse of US imperialism. In 1990, when he was transformed from ally to enemy *du jour*, Saddam was made the object of a full-scale PR campaign that employed a tasteless mix of Orientalism, homophobia, and anti-Arab racism. George H.W. Bush repeatedly mispronounced the Iraqi President's name as 'Sodom,' and his Old Testament reference was not lost on the general public. Jokes began flying that Kuwait had not only been raped, but 'Saddam-ized.' Supermarket tabloids prepared breathless 'exposes' of Saddam's 'secret sex life,' one going so far as to reveal that despite his public 'strongman' image, Saddam enjoyed homosexual relationships and even 'preferred the submissive role.' Is it any surprise that the final act of humiliation would involve the probing of the Iraqi leader by an American military doctor?"[9]

Conclusion

I've heard and seen some fantastic presentations at this VRA conference in the past few days. I thought the panel on social tagging yesterday was insightful and forward-thinking. Margaret Kipp described the "dynamic relationship between users and images," and I would agree wholeheartedly. Sometimes, the cynical me thinks that I am an art factory, churning out one exhibition after another for a consumer culture that digests material too quickly and too superficially. But the optimistic me hears people in the Gallery talking about images, content, and context, and I see firsthand how dynamic this relationship between users and images can be. Indeed, it can be truly transformative. One thing I've learned is that users (students, in my line

[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

of work) are smart. They don't want or appreciate a dumbed-down experience. Who would? People always rise to the occasion that is presented to them. I say, give our diverse users (our audiences) the best, in terms of images and the complex reasons how and why they were created.

In closing, in collaboration, and with thanks to my colleague Carole Mathey, who is here with us today, I'd like to share her contribution to project with a set of stickers of who we call "anonymous guy." Carole writes,

> "This homemade low-tech sticker, known as "anonymous guy," was created by placing packing tape over a bad passport or identity card photograph. By having many of the stickers, in a variety of sizes, posted on street signs, buildings, and newspaper boxes, the "guy" has gained an identity that defies his anonymous urban setting. Looking back at the viewer through his oversized glasses, the "anonymous guy" is like the Harmoniums in Kurt Vonnegut's book *The Sirens of Titan*, beings who are capable of only two messages: "here I am, here I am, here I am," and "so glad you are, so glad you are, so glad you are." He reminds us that he is here, and so are we."[10]

[10] See http://gallery.stlawu.edu and click on browse under "The Gallery Has A Posse."