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Creative resistance: Globalisation and digital art

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Creative Resistance in Digital Art

Melissa Milton-Smith

Digital media is contributing “perhaps more than any other technology, to the globalization of economies and cultures.”¹ In this paper, I examine the relationship between Globalization and digital art, with reference to the work of British artist, Ross Mawdsley. Key questions raised surround the interplay between artists’ complicity and creative resistance.

As one of the United Kingdom’s new breed of experimental artists, Mawdsley presents strong criticism towards Cultural Globalization. His opposition is manifested in a series of volumes, collectively titled *Simian*.² The term ‘*Simian*’ reveals something of his take. The anthology examines the cultural impact of Globalization, with specific reference to the human-animal. Mawdsley’s vision is Baudrillardian; in his alignment of Globalization with earlier projects of Western ‘Imperialism’ and his perception that the new state of reality (or ‘un-reality’) has led to the simulation of experience.

Simian’s momentum and spatial variability reflects the flow of Global dynamism. Its temporal dislocation and schizophrenic pace drags us across historical contexts and geographical locations. The form replicates the cultural flux and ephemerality of the Global *oeuvre*. Mawdsley’s art revealing how both Globalization and digital media possess the ability to create “rupture[s] with our previous relationship to time and space as well as to previous conceptions of the real and to larger metaphysical issues.”³

To enter *Simian*, is to be struck by liminal images of subjects as disparate as chemical warfare, suicide, terrorism and prostitution. Each is situated within the Global City’s space. As revealed in ‘Journey into Darkness’ (See Appendix for Figure 1) Mawdsley aligns the spread of corporate culture with the decay of individualism. This is evidenced by the emblazoning of the UK pharmaceutical brand ‘Boots’ on a razor blade and the tattooing of the Black (‘other’⁴) torso with a product barcode; simultaneous to the brandishing of tribal (‘local’) insignia upon the disembodied male form. The slow, fatalistic crawl of the lone insect across the corporate blade’s signals a threat to individualism.

Mawdsley’s ‘death of the individual’ is reflected in his repetition of simian clones in ‘Revolt’ and ‘Journey into Darkness’. The appearance of expressionless ‘Lego’-men in ‘Revolt’ makes reference to those who have conscribed to the Global cause. The disembodiment of the male torso in ‘Journey into Darkness’ (See Appendix for Figure 1.) suggests an absence of mind – a detachment from reason – in his part compliance with Globalization. His form is reduced to canvas for the projection of idioms. Mawdsley’s opposition to Cultural Globalization is political in kind. This is indicated by the recurrence of Soviet stars (see the upper body in Figure 1), the depictions of simians wearing Che Gueveraian berets and repeated references to ‘The Revolution’ (see appendix for Figure 3). Mawdsley’s style is emotive, with attempts made to personalise affects through the user’s interactive engagement. He presents us with choices: in ‘Tokyo Love Hotel Revolt’ (See Appendix for Figure 2) for example, the option of pressing ‘play’ on the video camera to witness an illicit prostitution scene. This action situates us a witting voyeur. Mawdsley’s art thus encourages us to choose what we do or do not want to see. These actions determine the direction of the piece.

To make these decisions writes Manovich, requires “a moral responsibility.”⁵ “By passing these choices onto the user, the author also passes on the responsibility to represent the world and the human condition in it.”⁶ It is a notion that fails to convince. While undoubtedly, Mawdsley’s aim is to politically enlist, he can do nothing to coerce us into response. As users, we must enter its “navigable spaces”⁷ through negotiation of the interface: the keyboard, the mouse. Beyond this, ethical engagement remains our choice.

If Mawdsley’s aim is to morally confront, he succeeds in doing so in ‘Tokyo Love Hotel Mistake’. In this volume, we are taken inside a Tokyo brothel. If we choose to proceed, we are introduced to a Japanese prostitute. In fragmented English, she uses Western sales phrases to gain our custom: “Well Baby, me so horny. Me love you long time.” Within seconds of the voice-over dialogue, a JVC branded video camera appears and the ‘play’ button lights up. Pressing play summons a video clip of an American client engaging in services. As the

¹ Mark Tribe, Foreword in Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, (The MIT Press: Cambridge Massachusetts, 2001) xi-xii

² [Http://www.simian.nu](http://www.simian.nu)

³ Timothy Allen Jackson, “Towards a New Media Aesthetic” in D. Trend [ed.] *Reading Digital Culture*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 349.

⁴ The term ‘other’ used in sense of Edward Said’s sense of non-Western; the Occidental.

⁵ Tribe, Op cit., p.44

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ James Donald, “Flannery: Botanising the Interface”, online publication for iCinema: Centre for Interactive Cinema Research, p. 1



action plays, dollar signs scroll as do the slogans: “What can I have for \$400”⁸ and the moral defense “it was only one night”.⁹ Set to a rhythmic bass tone that presents prostitution to be like any other form of Global entertainment, ‘Tokyo Love Hotel Mistake’ offers a bleak insight into the Asian sex-trade and its abuse by Western nationals. It suggests that it has developed a new agenda under Globalization, in its strategic marketing towards consumers. Adding to this concern, the clip playing from the camera has the distinct look of having been streamed directly from the Net. Mawdsley’s commentary extends to the spread of pornography across digital networks; raising questions such ownership, spectatorship and the objectification of ‘other’ forms.

The impact of Western culture upon that of the ‘other’ is revealed in Mawdsley’s ‘Revolt’. The volume slowly unravels to reveal a Middle Eastern man wielding a military rifle. The image is overlaid above the text:

The world is a dangerous and unstable place at the moment. Riots, civil disorder, urban unrest and war are rife right across the globe. People are rising up and making a stand. This day has been coming a long time. The revolution will not be televised. The day of the simian is upon us.¹⁰

The message is ominous. Written in the present tense, it calls for immediate political action. The same cry is reiterated in the final line: “The day of the simian is upon us.”¹¹ As the imagery unfolds, an atlas appears with population dots that move rapidly across a globe. The locations of Tokyo, Croatia, Norway, Liverpool, Havana and Melbourne are identified. Moments later, six television screens appear, with the option of selecting made clear. To switch them on is to reveal telecasts of riots occurring in different geographical locations. This footage gives the sense that similar events are taking place globally.

There is an historical undertone to ‘Revolt’. The statements: “This day has been coming a long time”¹² and “The revolution will not be televised”¹³ link the current projects of Global Resistance to revolutions that have come before. Images of “Riots, civil disorder, urban unrest”¹⁴ evoke the memory of Soviet Proletariat uprisings. The Socialist-Communist link is confirmed by the slogan

“freedom to all apes”¹⁵ and the recurrence of Che Guevaran-styled imagery in *Simian* works.

While making clear comments about Resistance, the image of the black, possibly Islamic gun-man, evokes the possibility of ‘Other’ actors rising up against Western political control. Opposition to America’s cultural homogenisation is an obvious connection. The close proximity of the different television sets to each other calls for revolutionary unification. The fact that a similar event is portrayed in each location suggests trans-national parallels of conflict and dissidence in the collective ‘simian’ condition.

Set to the sounds of a sombre aural refrain, ‘Revolt’ reveals the desensitisation that such forms as the television can have. This notion is re-iterated by the piece’s opening statement: “The revolution will not be televised”.¹⁶ Yet after the shock of the imagery begins to fade, are we too desensitised by Mawdsley’s art? *Simian* may be aesthetically intriguing or at best, raise awareness of cultural issues, but it too is a ‘televised’ and thereby simulated, version of events.

As with all creative forms *Simian* is a subjective piece. In his critique, Mawdsley fails to acknowledge the positive affects that have arisen from Cultural Globalization. Contrary to *Simian*’s depictions, Mark Tribe paints Globalization in terms of its opportunities for artistic exchange. In his Foreword to Lev Manovich’s, *The Language of New Media*, Tribe observes how Global interconnectivity is leading to artistic collaboration, with increased opportunities for exposure and participation. Its “newness” is what makes it:

an interesting place for cultural producers to work. New media represents a constantly shifting frontier for experimentation and exploration.¹⁷

In her paper ‘Globalization and the Formation of Claims’¹⁸ Saskia Sassen similarly identifies ways in which cultural Globalization has in fact facilitated creativity. She reveals how its challenge to Nationalism has produced “the possibility for new forms of power and politics at the subnational level.”¹⁹ Globalization she writes, has made room for those who never empathised with the politics of the nation state, be they: women; youth; ethnic minorities; Queer and/or indigenous people. An example might be of a chat room participant, who sees herself less as an Australian than a female teenager participating in a global community of VR

⁸ Ross Mawdsley, ‘Tokyo Love Hotel Mistake’ taken from *Simian*, [Http://www.simian.nu,1993](http://www.simian.nu,1993)

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Ross Mawdsley, ‘Revolt’ taken from *Simian*, [Http://www.simian.nu, 993](http://www.simian.nu, 993)

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Ross Mawdsley, ‘Revolt’, Episode ‘Melbourne’, taken from *Simian*, [Http://www.simian.nu, Vol. 6.1, 1993](http://www.simian.nu, Vol. 6.1, 1993)

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Tribe *Op cit.*, p. x

¹⁸ Saskia Sassen, ‘Globalization and the Formation of Claims’ in Joan Copjec and Michael Sorkin (Eds) *Giving Ground: The Politics of Proximity*, (London: Verso, 1999) 87

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

gamers. This process can encourage new senses of individual affirmation through the challenge to Nationalist notions of cultural affiliation.

Mawdsley's scepticism towards Globalization takes life from cultural-Imperialist discourses that align it with earlier forms of Imperialism. As Inda and Rosaldo observe, such criticism links cultural homogenisation with the:

ability of transnational capital, most often seen as American-dominated and mass-mediated, to distribute cultural goods around the globe.²⁰

The American mass media is centrally placed in this 'distribution' of idioms; its structures seen to influence global networks, particularly those in the Third World. A key concern is that marginal nations will become dependent upon Western-style programming and hence, commercialism. The six television sets in 'Journey into Darkness' – each from a different location yet featuring similar events – reflects Mawdsley's fear that the world is being transformed into a "mono-culture of consumption".²¹

In 'Tokyo Love Hotel Mistake' the interplay between the American client and Thai prostitute raises questions about North American Imperialism and the exploitation of non-Western cultures. But when Mawdsley offers the call for 'Revolution', he fails to acknowledge that his own messages are being distributed via Global communications. The marginalised actors he calls forth no doubt have limited access to the medium issuing the cry. Mark Tribe observes that while:

in a material sense, the Internet is a globally homogenous network with common tools and protocols, and while it is contributing, perhaps more than any other technology, to the globalization of economies and cultures...it nevertheless means different things in different parts of the world.²²

Just how are we to unite if our perceptions of cultural Globalization so dramatically differ? Is Mawdsley's use of the image as Imperial as the appropriation that he condemns? What permissions has he been granted, and how does he intend to aid the subject in his/her predicament? Such questions reflect affective discourses that highlight the tendency for commentators to express a "crude empathy",²³ or as Bennett writes: "to treat trauma as a kind of generalisable "unclaimed" experience that

can be made available to anyone through art and literature."²⁴

It is through the raising of these issues that one realises the importance of perceiving digital art from both within and outside of the system that it critiques. For it is clear that on some levels, Mawdsley's art is complicit with Global machinery. This is evidenced by his use of Global media such as The Internet, Flash, QuickTime and Explorer. (See Mawdsley's acknowledgements in *Figure 3*). And is ultimately revealed through his provision of avenues for the purchase of *Simian* products: stickers, artwork and posters. Mawdsley's resistance at times seems as 'Globalised' as the system that he critiques.

My reading of *Simian* then, is premised on the idea that "works that present the decay of local culture show only half the story of globalization".²⁵ The other side, acknowledges that "deterritorialization of culture is invariably the occasion for the reinsertion of culture in new time-space contexts."²⁶ Upon this note, I return to my original contention: that an artist is resistant is not to preclude their complicity.

Grossberg consolidates this thesis when he claims that the very complexity of art's situation within Globalization, indicates that "such artistic practices, even if they situate the audience as consumer, may also situate them in other contradictory subject-positions."²⁷ This binary is brilliantly illustrated by McEvelley when he observes that a true "hybrid object attempts to incorporate into itself its own counterweight or critique – its other."²⁸ Thus marking a key difference between artists that are unwittingly complicit and those that try, at least try on some level, to acknowledge their own participation in Global processes. Recognition of this interplay remains the challenge for digital artists critiquing cultural Globalization.

²⁰ Jonathon Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo, 'Introduction: A World in Motion' in Jonathon Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo [Eds.] *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, 2002, p. 13

²¹ *Ibid.* pp. 13-14

²² Tribe *Op cit.*, xi-xii

²³ Jill Bennett 'Face-to-Face Encounters: Testimonial Imagery and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission' in 'Affect and Sensation', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, Volume 2, No. 2, 2001 and Volume 3, Number 1, 2002, p.53

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.41

²⁵ Inda and Rosaldo, *Op cit.*, p. 11

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Lawrence Grossberg, *Dancing in Spite of Myself: Essays on Popular Culture*, (Durham, Duke University Press: 1997), 155.

²⁸ Jackson *Op Cit.*, p.349.

Thomas McEvelley, *Art and Discontent: Theory at the Millennium*, Documentext, (New York, McPherson and Company: 1991), 176.

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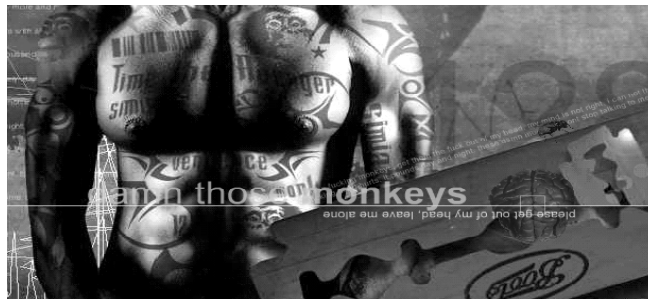


Figure 1

Ross Mawdsley, 'Journey into Darkness', taken from *Simian*, <http://www.simian.nu>, 1993



Figure 2

Ross Mawdsley, 'Tokyo Love Hotel Mistake' taken from *Simian*, <Http://www.simian.nu>, 1993.



Figure 3.
'Revolt' taken from Ross Mawdsley. [Http://www.simian.nu](http://www.simian.nu), 1993.