

USER

INFOTECHNODEMO

MediaWorkBook

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If nanotechnologies are so small as to be invisible, genetic mapping and manipulation moves one step closer to the realm of pure code, that disembodied state of information that so infatuates our culture at the present moment. Genotech is here seen as the cryptographic key to death—the way to translate DNA and thereby to find a secret switch to terminate termination. We’ve yet to advance far enough into genetically-based gerontology to find ourselves confronting the inevitable issues of eugenics, but we will. Neither nanotech nor genotech has yet been shown to affect super-longevity, so they are both at that moment of ideal perfection for the zealot, forever exulting “when the technology is perfected...” The sole strategy that has produced any results at all in the laboratory tests is extremely reduced caloric intake. Starvation-level diets seem to extend life spans of certain rodents, but I’m not sure if a culture in which the phrase “Super-size it!” is more commonly heard than grace before meals is ready to go that far. Better to wait for the nanotechnology to repair your DNA, while you’re ordering fries with that shake.

**VISUAL INTELLECTUALS**

LET'S FACE IT

EVEN WHEN INTELLECTUALS AREN'T TALKING ABOUT WORDS, THEY EXPRESS THEMSELVES THROUGH, BY AND WITH THEM TO SUCH AN EXTENT THAT WHAT THEY GENERATE CAN NEVER TRULY BE SEEN AS A DISCUSSION ABOUT ANYTHING OTHER THAN THEM.

This explains the way that no matter how much art history, design criticism, or new media studies claim to deal with visual and spatial systems, these discursive modes tend to resolve themselves finally around, well, around discourse itself. This is not to say that this text-based intellectual work is in the end consecrated to the craft of writing, as anyone who has valiantly pushed through reams of turgid academic prose can attest (word processing aside, Truman Capote's chestnut, "That's not writing, that's typing," applies). But something new is brewing. I would claim that we are about to witness the wide-scale emergence of visual intellectuals—people simultaneously making, pondering and commenting on visual culture, but in a way that doesn't perforce adhere to the primacy of the word.

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These are the people creating the visual culture that surrounds us, a culture that over the course of the past hundred years has essentially supplanted text's preeminence. It would be easy enough to write this development off with the cliché about the triumph of the mute image over the expressive word. But we're long past that narrative now, willing to lift our "downcast eyes" (to cite historian Martin Jay) to look into the light box. Although the utopian promise that will allow people to "write" with audiovisual media often recedes with each new advance (at least on the part of the dominant broad- and even narrowcasters), there is a growing body of work that proves that complex argumentation, sophisticated critique, and even languages of praise are being generated outside of purely text-based discourse.

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The World Wide Web is the obvious place to go looking for such multi-mediated ways of thinking. This is, after all, a medium in which the object, that of which it is composed (the source code), and any commentary on that object all exist contemporaneously and conceptually in the same place/non-place of the network.

**THE ABILITY TO
SCALE WINDOWS
WITHIN WINDOWS,**

TO CREATE INSTANTANEOUS LINKAGES,

**AND TO COMMENT ON
THE DEVELOPMENT OF
AN ART MOVEMENT
USING AN IDENTICAL
MODE OF PRODUCTION
AND DISTRIBUTION**

**ALL OF THIS HAS LED TO
THE PARTICULAR FLAVOR OF
VISUALIZED, HYPER-CODED
META-COMMENTARY.**

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THE FIRST SUCH INSTANTIATIONS WERE ADMITTEDLY SOPHOMORIC—I.E., SITES LIKE **SUCK.COM** (WEB PAGES THAT SUCK, GET IT?)

— BUT THINGS IMPROVED AS THE NET.ARTS EVOLVED, AND IT BECAME OBVIOUS THAT THE ART AND THE DISCOURSE ABOUT THAT ART WERE CONTEXTUALLY AND CONSTITUTIVELY INDISTINGUISHABLE.

THERE WAS ALSO A WILLINGNESS TO EXPLORE META-STRUCTURING OF DATA AS ART, AS WITH *10D'S* REMARKABLE DECONSTRUCTION DEVICE, **WEBSTALKER**,

Lisa Jevbratt's **SOFTWARE ART PROJECT 1:1, A VISUALIZED MAPPING OF THE WEB,**

OR TO USE THE STRUCTURES OF THE DIGITAL MEDIA TO ACTIVELY INTERVENE INTO LONGSTANDING DEBATES,

as with pseudo-gaming model of Lev Manovich and Norman Klein's *Freud-Lissitzky Navigator*.



Too often, though, the Web breeds a techno-solipsism, an unwarranted confidence that computer networks are generating something entirely without precedent.

This is nonsense, of course, as avant-garde film and video offer a long history of audio-visual essays and meta-critical production.

To name just a few: in the '60s, there was Tom Tom the Piper's Son, Ken Jacobs's reframing at varying speeds and in different sections of an example of early cinema; in the '70s, Joan Jonas's structuralist video intervention Vertical Roll ; in the '80s, the hyper-theorizations of Gary Hill's proto-interactive single channel piece, Site Recite: A Prologue; and in the '90s, Trouble in the Image, Pat O'Neil's magnum opus of cinematic optical printing.

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Perhaps better understood by thinking netizens is the debt to graphic design. Although some ardent youngsters (and not-so-youngsters, unfortunately) protest that something as commercially “tainted” as the professional practice of design has nothing to say to artists like themselves, the impact of contemporary graphics is indisputable. While modernist masters like Paul Rand promoted the ideal of the designer as refining reagent, the substrate through which someone else’s message could be filtered, contemporary designers no longer feel obliged to make a show of such modesty. Rand’s model was already being dismantled when desktop publishing exploded, radically dropping the price of sophisticated visualization tools (programs like Photoshop, Fontographer and Pagemaker) and fostering an efflorescence of style for style’s sake. More self-conscious designers also woke up to the complex challenges to “clarity” accumulating under the rubric of postmodern theory, and began to conceptualize how digital technologies could allow them to develop their own signature styles. The best architectural publications have long been examples of visual intellectuality, and the 1,344-page collaboration between architect Rem Koolhaas and designer Bruce Mau that is *S,M,L,XL* was rightly lauded. In *S,M,L,XL*, the point is neither to illustrate words not to caption pictures, but rather to create a synergistic matrix of images and texts.

No one has ever accused the painter Peter Halley of an inability to read the zeitgeist, so it’s instructive to see how he has reacted to the emergence of

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visual intellectuality. Back in the ‘80s, Galerie Bruno Bischoffberger published *Peter Halley: Collected Essays 1981-87* (designed by Anthony McCall Associates) which, like the Semiotext(e) books so popular at the time, was an elegant, understated, monochromatic text that announced its seriousness and modesty to the point of having a brown paper cover. Contrast that approach to the overwhelming seduction of the recent *Peter Halley: Maintain Speed*. Edited by Halley’s studio director Corey Reynolds and designed by COMA (Cornelia Blatter and Marcel Hermans, who also worked on Halley’s magazine *Index*), *Maintain Speed* is a Peter Halley production from exploding pink cover to incredibly detailed colophon. Like *S,M,L,XL*, it offers a new (if expensive) model for the visual intellectual.

One of the things that distinguishes this volume from other catalogues is that the reproductions of the paintings, the installation shots, and the incidental photography of the artist and his milieu are all subtended by a delirious grid of parenthetical and relational databases.

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**MANY OF THE
PAINTINGS ARE,
OF COURSE,
GRIDS,
SO THERE IS
AN IMMEDIATE
RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN THE
CONTENT AND
THE FORM.**

Continuing this is a motif which the editorial and design team referred to informally as the “information bar”: a row of ten, postage-stamp-sized boxes, delineated by pink, perforated lines, running along the bottom of each page. These “stamps” are filled only occasionally, sometimes in blocks of two or three, and can be images, diagrams, captions, or quotes. This allows not for a single parallel, but a multiplicity of argumentations and contextualizations of the work under discussion.

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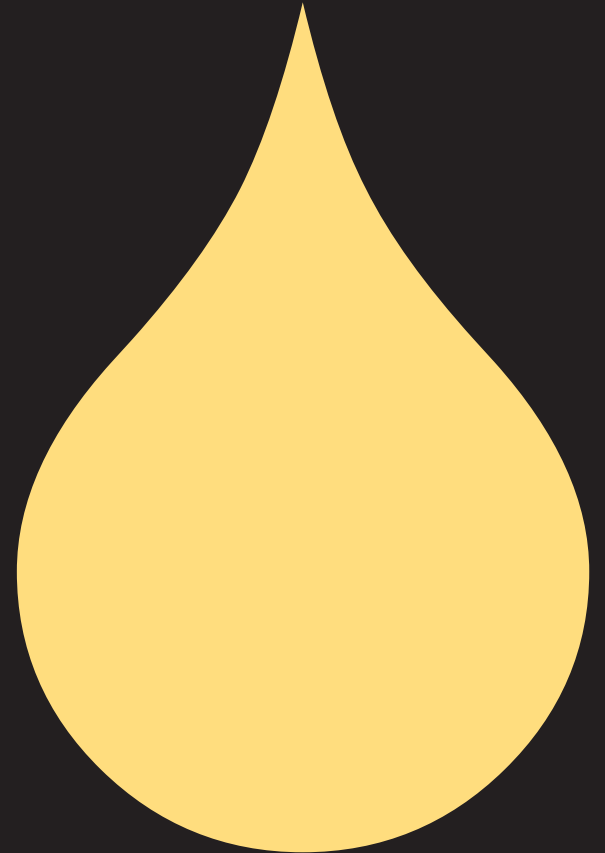
This strategy is taken to its utmost when the rows of stamps become pages of them, with a ten-by-ten grid of the pink, perforated lines defining the field for a postage stamp-sized Halley retrospective. The first double-page spread is devoted to the year 1981, and features just five paintings on one page and two on the other. By the time you get four spreads deeper, those original seven paintings have been augmented by 42 more, and their spatial relationships have remained consistent, though they've been compacted together toward the Y-axis. Turn the page, however, and the planar development of chronological sequencing is challenged abruptly. A series of blue, curvilinear arrows is overprinted on the exact same grid from the previous spread, but this time creating a flow chart that indicates the conceptual and stylistic linkages both forwards and backwards in time. Along with the subsequent spreads, this offers as beautiful a double mapping of the diachronic and synchronic (to appropriate the theoryspeak of which Halley was so enamored in the '80s) as you are likely to see anywhere.

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By discussing *S,M,L,XL* and *Peter Halley: Maintain Speed*, I've obviously stacked the decks, as these projects were masterminded respectively by an architect and an artist. How might historians of music, political scientists, demographers, or feminist legal scholars spin their tales, fabricate their theories, or illuminate their causes in commensurately dynamic ways?

Could the turn from the mire of formulaic structures of knowledge with which we are all familiar to the point of sheer apathy?

Perhaps first we need to let go of the notion that language is the sober way to truth, and put the visual's intoxicating powers to use doing something other than selling sex, stuff, or (as with so much of today's art and design) simply itself.



URINE NATION