The idea of a graphic unconscious in modern critical theory can most straightforwardly be traced to Walter Benjamin’s brief essay on “The Mimetic Faculty,” where he notes that “graphology has taught us to recognize in handwriting images that the unconscious of the writer conceals in it.” The idea appears relatively straightforward: our handwriting reveals elements of our mental life through the form of our writing which do not necessarily come across in the content of our words. It builds on basic Freudian insights, as well as an early 20th century ‘science’ of mind which looked to understand the relationship between our conscious faculties and our ability to control our inner desires. Against the Cartesian revolution which attempted to banish doubt of internal thought processes, these sciences (of somnambulation, hypnosis, etc.) sought to reconcile the presumed necessity of an enlightened subject for good governance with the obvious fact that the vast majority of our mental processes lay beyond our control.

As such, the relatively simple idea of a graphic unconscious has rather explosive implications. The writing subject, (which is to say, the revolutionary subject of the Declaration of Independence or the Declaration of the Rights of Man) supposedly capable of persuasion, reasoned argument, and so forth, is betrayed by the very form of writing. The evolution of printing presses should have, at some level, obviated this problem. By hiding the hidden – that is, by concealing what handwriting would reveal – the printed word allows for a degree of standardization that makes rational subject formation possible. (Even mistakes here become encoded: we speak of typos and not Freudian slips in typing, although “slipping” is precisely what the fingers do when they type a word differently than the one consciously intended.) In the ancient philosophical quarrel between speaking presence (the one consciously intended) and written word, the two come to coincide with the removal of the unconscious in the typed word which appears equally in official print media and the teleprompted speeches of today’s politicians.

It is important, then, to ask what Philagraftika’s 2010 exhibition, “The Graphic Unconscious,” draws its title from a different moment in the work of Walter Benjamin. Walter Benjamin proposed an interesting analogy in his essay, A Small History of Photography (1931): “It is through photography that we first discover the existence of [the] optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.” Let us ask a provocative question: Is there a print unconscious? If so, where does it lie? Just as printed materials have become so ubiquitous in our daily visual culture that they pass unnoticed, so too have print processes become an integral part of art-making without being acknowledged. Can the ethos of printmaking serve as a framework for understanding contemporary artistic production? Can a close reading of the realm of contemporary art from the perspective of print help illuminate, in some way, our understanding of the world?

To speak of a “graphic unconscious” here is not to speak of what is revealed in the psychoanalytic slips of personality, but rather in what the social matrix itself obscures in the very move to print culture. The conceptual formulation of the show thus owes as much to Fredric Jameson’s The Political Unconscious as it does to Benjamin. The question here is not the psychoanalytic moment of individual psychology, but rather the functional regressions, disavowals and slippages of society at large. Indeed, this does not remove the individual. It only forces us to confront the personal psyche as a worm in the blood of a vast (and often prosthetic) social organism.

Consider, as an example, Sue Coe’s daring piece, Helping Hands, which appears amidst a number of excellent works currently on display at the Print Center. Coe displays the now mediated images of post-earthquake Haiti in a violent black and white that shows in many ways the graphic and political unconscious of the tragedy. The graphic element is the way these images are stripped of their unconscious in media representations. Anderson Cooper covered in blood and soot, Pat Robertson covered in mania, Tom Hanks in self-righteousness. Each, in their own way, reaches out a hand to Haiti under the banner of ‘help’ (indeed even Robertson), but it is never clear what the actual (unconscious) intention of those hands are. For whom or in whose space does one speak? What unspoken desires mingle with the ostensible need to send money and help Haiti? How does the notion of help obscure the figure of ‘helping’ the native which underwrote the colonial decimation of Haiti for the past four centuries, continuing through the ousting of the democratically elected Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004? At the same time, what genuine outreach (most obviously that of Paul Farmer), might offer a democratic, infrastructural form of help? What methods of learning to help are there still to be employed? These forms of domination or genuine concern or apathy or empathy or love or racism that might appear in the graphological unconscious, which are erased in the modern media, are enabled to reappear in Coe’s work. One need not make here some grandiose statement on the viability or necessity of print culture in such an environment. Nor is it necessarily to unduly laud an artistic representation when the real work remains on the ground and in the backrooms of local and global governance. But the specificity of the graphic unconscious here, at the very least, allows for a conversation to happen which is otherwise repressed daily by the repeated calls for an “apolitical” discourse to help those in need.

- Avi Alpert
Limits of Triviality

For the first major museum survey of her work, Maira Kalman has transformed one of the rooms in the Institute for Contemporary Art into a unique cabinet de curiosité. Various works on paper, embroideries and quotations create a visual tapestry on the walls surrounding a heteroclitic assortment of chairs, ladders, suitcases, buckets, shoes, paint rags, display cases and tables teaming with lists, Bobby pins, balls of string, children’s books and assorted paraphernalia. Unlike the intriguing oddities of 19th-century collections, which often ranged from natural history to geology, ethnography and archeology, Kalman’s collection is a testament to our culture, to the everyday existence of the contemporary world.

If the first glance at this heteroclitic assortment of objects were not enough to call into question the category “fine art,” the motley activities of the artist herself would surely succeed in dismantling the hierarchies that continue to plague the art world. For even the most avant-garde attempts to overcome the divide between high and low art very often slip into a performative contradiction precisely because they rely on ‘noble’ aesthetic practices (video, performance, etc.) to call into question the very distinction between ‘noble’ and ‘ignoble’ arts. Kalman not only avoids this contradiction, she seemingly disregards the hierarchies of aesthetic practices by moving fluidly between painting, illustration, embroidery, installation, citation, design, etc. She also seamlessly navigates between a clear preoccupation with art history (Matisse, Magritte, Cartier-Bresson), and a playful engagement with contemporary culture (keenly illustrated by the ‘Newyorkistan’ cover for the New Yorker three months after September 11, 2001).

And yet, it is Maira Kalman’s doodling that makes it into a museum, and Flaubert’s writings that have been canonized. Taken independently, some of Kalman’s work is distinctly unremarkable (especially when contrasted with pieces like C.L.U.E. by A.L. Steiner + robbinschilds in the contemporaneous exhibit, “Dance with Camera”).

Indeed, Kalman’s cabinet de curiosité is light and airy, and is much less captivating than slightly amusing. The question that remains after a relatively un-engaging visit to the show is: what—if any—are the limits of triviality? And why does this assortment of trivialities merit the spotlight of a museum whereas others do not? Since the message of the exhibit seems to be that there is art in the trivialities of our everyday lives, the transition between the entrance and exit of the museum is as smooth as it is voluntary.

From Coca-Cola’s Hopenhagen Campaign that canvassed the climate summit with the message of hope in a bottle to Obama’s soaring rhetoric that once again put bows and ribbons on ‘business as usual,’ this colossal failure marked by back-room deals sidelined frank discussions concerning the eco-economic interests behind the continued sacking of the environment. Evo Morales was one of the few world leaders to take a serious stance on climate change, and in the wake of Copenhagen he has decided to summon the First World Conference of the People on Climate Change in order to include indigenous peoples, social movements, environmentalists and scientists in the decision-making process.

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- Theodore Tucker

This exhibit confronts us with what authors such as Danto and Rancière have theorized as the contradiction of the commonplace: if art succeeds in abolishing its structural hierarchies by becoming identical with the commonplace, it ultimately destroys its identity qua art. Therefore, it is worth asking whether or not the art of the commonplace is destined to failure: either it remains on the side of art and is never commonplace enough, or it finally succeeds in becoming commonplace but at the price of destroying its identity as art.

This conundrum extends well beyond Kalman’s exhibit, and two of the three citations that preside over it recall the heritage that she is keenly aware of. Let us take the poignant example of the quote from Flaubert’s Madame Bovary: “as if the fullness of the soul did not sometimes overflow in the emptiest metaphors, since no one can ever give the exact measure of his needs, nor of his conceptions, nor of his sorrows; and since human speech is like a cracked tin kettle, on which we hammer out tunes to make bears dance when we long to move the stars.” The new context that Kalman invents for this quote seems to suggest a partial response to the contradiction highlighted above: human passion is always funneled through the triteness of the quotidian, and all we have are the cracked kettles that we have accumulated through our personal travels. In other words, art is nothing more than the commonplace act of sculpting an existence out of the everyday things we have inherited.

The natural world, in spite of what the media vultures suggest, cannot be separated from the social, political and economic world. Although this should be clear in the case of climate catastrophes, it might appear to be less obvious in the case of earthquakes. The recent calamity in Haiti should serve to dispel any notion that the natural world, as we have recently seen in the Copenhagen charade.

Indeed, it can act as a stage prop to distract from the rampant pillaging of the natural world, as we have recently seen in the Copenhagen charade. From Coca-Cola’s Hopenhagen Campaign that canvassed the climate summit with the message of hope in a bottle to Obama’s soaring rhetoric that once again put bows and ribbons on ‘business as usual,’ this colossal failure marked by back-room deals sidelined frank discussions concerning the eco-economic interests behind the continued sacking of the environment. Evo Morales was one of the few world leaders to take a serious stance on climate change, and in the wake of Copenhagen he has decided to summon the First World Conference of the People on Climate Change in order to include indigenous peoples, social movements, environmentalists and scientists in the decision-making process.
and the progressive urbanization of the poor. Before falling prey to the rampant stereotypes concerning the unorganized and uncivilized nature of the ‘developing world,’ we would be wise to remind ourselves that a significant portion of the concrete buildings had to be build without steel reinforcement and that the population of Port-au-Prince has skyrocketed to 2 million due to the influx of the desperately poor from the countryside. To fully understand this situation, light needs to be shed on the fault line lying deep beneath the recent earthquake: the fault line of American imperialism in Haiti.

From 1957 to 1986, the U.S. supported the corrupt dictatorships of Papa Doc Duvalier and then Baby Doc Duvalier (according to some estimates, Haiti owes $1.3 billion in external debt and 40% of it is due to the U.S.-backed Duvaliers). Baby Doc opened the Haitian economy to U.S. capital in the 1970s and 1980s, and American agricultural imports flooded the market, destroying peasant agriculture. Hundreds of thousands of people flocked to the slums of Port-au-Prince to work in the sweatshops located in U.S. export processing zones. Haitians drove the Duvaliers from power and eventually elected Jean-Bertrand Aristide as president on a platform of land reform, reforestation, peasant aid, infrastructure investment, increased wages and union rights for sweatshop workers. However, the government of George H. W. Bush backed a coup that ousted Aristide the very same year of his election (1991).

Although Bill Clinton sent troops to Haiti to restore Aristide to power in 1994, it was on the condition that he implement the U.S. neoliberal plan. Since he never fully cooperated, the U.S. eventually imposed an economic embargo on the country, driving workers and peasants deeper and deeper into poverty. Finally, George W. Bush’s government collaborated with Haiti’s ruling elite in 2004 to back death squads that toppled the

Let us Not Pine After an Absent God

Hunter Stabler’s *Sator Square* seems paradigmatic, precisely because of its mock sophistication, of a contemporary impulse that fetishizes craft and invests in the hand a redemptive force. The intricacy and complexity of Stabler’s cut-paper does not serve a merely decorative function. The various cuts, twists, and folds in the design serve to unfold a latent, invisible mystery—the mystery in this case of the *Sator Square*. Without going into the archeological record in detail, this ancient graffiti whose earliest appearance is traced back to 79 AD, is a latin palindrome that spells out *Rotas Opera Tenet Aereop Sator* (the sower [Farmer] Aereop has [as] works wheels [a plough]). Since the palindrome itself contains the anagram *Pater Nostra* (the Lord’s Prayer) that can be made into the Greek cross, the remaining letters, A and O, letters symbolizing *alpha* and *omega*, the beginning and the end of the *Sator* Tetraptych. The artist a shaman? Does the esoteric connotations of the *Sator Square* serve as a cipher for esoteric, hidden meaning? Does it purport to unveil without the hysteria that one finds in Paul McCarthy or Jason Rhodes, or the unparalleled cynicism of Jeff Koons? Is it purports to unveil without the hysteria that one finds in Paul McCarthy or Jason Rhodes, or the unparalleled cynicism of Jeff Koons? Is art a cipher for religious palliatives. However, I fear that it is clearly centered in prophetic tones: both secular, as in his interest in the scientific messianism of Buckminster Fuller, and sacred, as in his reference to the Book of Revelations. However, for my purposes here I would like to simply focus on the problematic dialectic that emerges between the sacred and profane notions of unveiling in Hunter Stabler’s *Sator Square*. Adam Parker Smith’s collages and Donna Ruff’s *Aureoles Series*.}

**Let us Not Pine After an Absent God**

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-Alex Kukuljevic
IN THE PAST, the operation of great wealth has often been to free its possessors from ignoble pursuits and low company and to impose on them a sense of public responsibility. Today that tendency has been reversed.

By far the majority of the rich are daily drudges in the same mills as the go-getters who are still on the make, and they work tirelessly at tasks which render the operation of their wealth and power as uncontrollable as that of any other marketeer. Thus, it may very well be that the effect of mass production and consumption is really to bring about a practical rather than a theoretic communism. When men and women have been transformed into replaceable parts born, raised, and driven, and have become accustomed to the consumption of uniform products, it is hard to see where any individualism remains. Certainly the sense of personal or private property has become very weak in these circumstances. And the fanatic defenders of private enterprise are mainly those corporation bureaucrats who manipulate the savings of an anonymous crowd of invisible investors.

In practice, then, the very rich today are bureaucrats in their various monopolistic empires of soap, oil, steel, cars, movies, newspapers, magazines, and so on. And they have the minds of bureaucrats. They are timid, cautious conformists. Like anybody else, they accept the doctrine that economic success is rewarded by the power to conform.

Flaunting the money for all the consumer goods, they have arrived. And at that point the success code plays them false. There are no more trees to climb. Having arrived at the top, they find no plateau on which to arrange a spacious and useful existence. As men at the top, they inherit a code of work and play no different from Tom’s, Dick’s, and Harry’s down below them. The English or European businessman, once at the top, used to shift his mode of existence to the squarichanical in a generation or two. He could use his leisure in politics, scholarship, or in patronizing artists and the dealers in old pictures or distribute many tiny gratuities through bureaucratic foundations which are run on the most finicky, academic lines. This, of course, overlooks these endowments for hospitals and libraries which are intended as family monuments. And it is not true to say that the rich are ‘parsimonious’. The point here is simply that they are timid and unresourceful in a way which stands in stark contrast to the zip and push that has put them where they are.

The relative helplessness, social isolation, and irresponsibility of the rich highlights the circumstances of the struggle to invade a nude and starving condition? The very conditions of success render the rich suspicious of those failures whom they might be expected to assist. They have no training or taste which would enable them to select struggling artists or writers who might be worthy of aid, in these matters, therefore, they work through the dealers in old pictures or distribute many tiny gratuities through bureaucratic foundations which are run on the most finicky, academic lines. This, of course, overlooks these endowments for hospitals and libraries which are intended as family monuments. And it is not true to say that the rich are ‘parsimonious’. The point here is simply that they are timid and unresourceful in a way which stands in stark contrast to the zip and push that has put them there where they are.

The relative helplessness, social isolation, and irresponsibility of the rich highlights the same situation among those who are striving toward that goal. The circumstances of the struggle to invade a nude and starving condition? Except in an economic sense, the rich do not even form a class, as, for example, the “film colony” does. So that when distinguished foreigners come to America they naturally seek the company of movie stars rather than of the wealthy. The stars have a personal symbolic relation to the currents of national life which the remote and anonymous figures of celestial finance do not. The stars are distinct individuals wearing human masks that represent some aspect of the collective dream. But the rich are dim and obscure, sharing the tastes and make-up of the very people above whom they have risen, and yet deprived of the satisfactions of mass solidarity in an egalitarian society.

- Herbert Marshall McLuhan

(article originally published in The Mechanical Bride 1951)
Michael Haneke and The White Ribbon

When did the gaze collapse?
Before TV took precedence.
Told precedence over what? Current events?
Over life.
Yes. I feel our gaze has become a program under control, subsidized. The image, the only thing capable of denying nothingness, is also the gaze of nothingness on us.

~ Jean-Luc Godard’s Élue de L’Amour

In many ways, Michael Haneke stands virtually alone in contemporary cinema. One of the most divisive and controversial filmmakers working today, what has set Haneke apart from other cinematic provocateurs is the consistency with which his provocations have remained committed to a rigorous and unflinching critique of contemporary Western culture. Philosophically rooted in the modern German tradition of Nietzsche-Freud-Marx and its development in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, in particular Adorno, Haneke’s critical vision is as ambitious in scope as it is life, but then to present it cinematically in such a way that it becomes unsettlingly unfamiliar as the violence and structural oppression beneath the surface of everyday reality reveals itself.

This approach is frequently punctuated by a sudden shock-moment in which we are ripped out of the onscreen narrative and confronted with the fact that we are experiencing a cinematic image, a constructed reality. These include the horrific scenes in Code Unknown that are then revealed to be dubbing sessions, the unease created by the mysterious videotapes in Caché, and of course the infamous fourth-wall shattering ‘rewind’ scene in Funny Games. The effectiveness of these shock-moments is wholly dependant on Haneke’s mastery as a realist – it is the sudden betrayal of the impeccably achieved naturalism that produces their unsettling power. Such moments make explicit what is implied throughout the rest of the films; for Haneke, realism always presents a double bind, it is always ‘realism’, a construction of reality that he challenges us to acknowledge as such, even as he continues seducing us with his skill as a realist, tempting us to accept the seemingly flawless reality uncritically and then punishing us when we succumb to these temptations. In this way, the usually conservative impulse toward conventional naturalism ends up producing radical social critique in Haneke’s hands.

Haneke’s quasi-sadistic method of critique reaches its apotheosis in Funny Games, which takes the self-betraying and untenable ‘game’ of cinematic realism as its structuring principal and mounts an almost unbearable polemic on the relationship between violence and the image in a culture saturated by both. It is not surprising that such an openly confrontational film failed to engage American audiences and critics, and so it is understandable, if perhaps disappointing, that after this attempt at mainstream subversion proved commercially unsuccessful (and failed to receive the serious critical appraisal it deserved), Haneke has decided to retreat to the safer shores of an art-house period piece, which, for all its unsettling power and meticulous realization, ultimately lets viewers contemplate a fable about the roots of evil from a comfortable distance. The White Ribbon may well be a masterpiece – but is it the kind of masterpiece we need? I, for one, will hold out hope that after basking in the justly deserved establishment praise, Haneke will return to his more crucial role as a divisive polemicist and critic of the present.

~ Mike Vass

fanaticism leave room only for cruelty and violence, whether in rebellion or in acquiescence. It is surely meant as a kind of parable not only for the German descent into fascism that occurs in the years immediately following those portrayed in the film but also for our own contemporary age of terrorism.

As such it is certainly of interest, and one can imagine why Haneke might be interested in exploring his usual themes in a different historical setting, thereby broadening the critique of Western culture. And yet, removing this critique from the present comes at a cost. The effectiveness of Haneke’s naturalistic approach is considerably dampened when it is removed from a contemporary context. The tension he has become such a master at generating, which is rooted in the ontological uncertainty between image and reality as it is experienced both onscreen and in contemporary life, and which is the explosive core of his aesthetic, is necessarily absent from The White Ribbon, set as it is in a period preceding the age of the image.
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Machete Interview with Cornel West
First Installment

The Flickering Light of Performative Paideia... in the Night of the American Empire

Gabriel Rockhill: An overview of your work to date gives less a sense of sharp turns or breaks than an impression of intellectual intensification. I mean by this that the majority of your fundamental concerns have been present from your very first publications: prophetic pragmatism, radical historicism, genealogy, the critique of nihilism, black cultural democracy, race matters, and social critique. In looking back over your work to date, do you have the same impression? How would you explain your intellectual itinerary from your current perspective? How do you see your research projects evolving in the immediate future?

Cornel West: I think you’re right about intensification, and I think that when you actually look at what I have done over twenty-five years now, since 1982, it certainly began with a deep sense of existential scars, ontological wounds and psychic bruises of white supremacy. At the core of my work is the issue of what it means to be human and living in a situation where you encounter the absurd as an American in America because you’re dealing with these scars, bruises and wounds and yet determined to respond, to resist, to critique, to make some sense out of it. That’s why Kierkegaard has always meant so very much to me, because here is somebody who’s wrestling with the absurd in the sense of his own thorn in his flesh. Of course, I had a different thorn than he did, but we’re both human. I grew up in a segregated America, segregated California, and tried to come to terms with what it means to be human, but my initial encounter was with this white supremacy bombardment. Now from there, of course I would go on to engage in a much larger critical analysis of American empire, capitalist modes of production, patriarchal modes of domination, homophobic modes of degradation, but it was that encounter with white supremacy that sat at the centre. And then there was also the deep prophetic Christian foundation for me, which has always been the launching pad for my conversations with Marxism, pragmatism, various forms of radical historicism, even radical forms of radical humanism (I would consider people like Erich Auerbach and Edward Said humanists from whom I’ve learned much, though neither one would be in any way Marxist).

CW: I think that for me the deepest existential source of coming to terms with the white supremacist bombardment was music. And I think, in some ways, that this is true for black America as a whole, from spirituals and blues through jazz, rhythm and blues, and even up to hip hop. From the very beginning, I always conceived of myself as aspiring to be a bluesman in a world of ideas and a jazzman in the life of the mind. And what is distinctive about using blues and jazz as a kind of model or source of intellectual inspiration is to be flexible and fluid and improvisational, multi-dimensional, finding one’s own voice but deploying that voice in a variety of different contexts, a variety of different discursive strategies, a variety of different modes of rhetorical persuasion as well as logical argumentation in order to make some kind of impact on the world. In that regard, you can imagine. I had to almost reverse the disciplinary divisions of knowledge in the academy. I always had to go up against more academic forms of presentation, even of producing knowledge in a certain sense, and of course as a bluesman or a jazzman it meant that I wanted to be a public preacher of paideia and I had to go where the public was. For there’s an academic public I take very seriously as a professor at Princeton and teacher to students and so forth. There’s a cultural public through television and radio, such as with my dear brother Tavis Smiley’s show, every week now for 5 years we go from Leopardi’s poetry to the hip hop music of Chuck D. There is an artistic public that I relate to, and of course there’s a religious public which is not simply Christian. There’s an organized working class public; I spend time with trade union movements and their various centers. Each one of these publics is a crucial site for the articulation of a kind of deep democratic vision that I have. But in the end, it has much to do with the blues orientation and the jazz sensibility where you’re not static, you’re not stationary, you’re always dynamic and open to speaking in and enacting one’s own paideia in the light of these different contexts.

GR: Given this existential source of your engagement, why was it important for you to articulate your struggle in a philosophic trajectory?

CW: Well I just felt that one has to be in conversation with the most sophisticated voices, the most refined viewpoints, and as I matriculated through college I was deeply, deeply affected by Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Hegel, Marx, Lukács, and Simmel. These writers and thinkers constituted not just a launching pad for my conversations with Marxism, pragmatism, various forms of radical historicism, even radical forms of radical humanism (I would consider people like Erich Auerbach and Edward Said humanists from whom I’ve learned much, though neither one would be in any way Marxist). But in the end, it has much to do with the blues orientation and the jazz sensibility where you’re not static, you’re not stationary, you’re always dynamic and open to speaking in and enacting one’s own paideia in the light of these different contexts.

GR: How does the intertwining of this existential dimension and the philosophic dimension relate to your own discursive strategies and your ability to adeptly navigate between publications that are primarily for the erudite audience of the intelligentsia and less scholarly writings that touch the larger public?

To be continued in the next issue of Machete


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