The Politics of Nature

Natural disasters are often perceived as moments of uniform human suffering. Largely unpredictable and uncontrollable, they occur as part of indifferent movements in the earth’s surface and atmosphere. They occasion, moreover, in the human environment we’re all familiar with, the rapid appearance of media vultures, which hastily hover overhead to give panoramic views of death and destruction. These images of disaster convey, with rare exceptions, a relatively singular message: Here is the unavoidable human carnage left in the trail of the awesome and cruel powers of the natural world.

And yet, as the media vultures spiral overhead, soon to disappear after the carnage is buried and gone, one has to ask if this is all simply the result of the cold and indifferent forces of “nature.” In an era of growing awareness of man-made climate change, we can begin to work for a more astute understanding of the ways in which human agency is intertwined with the transformations of nature.

Unfortunately, however, this awareness has often been capped by a relatively shortsighted moral imperative: recycle and buy green to save the planet! This imperative, though surely important at a certain level, has the corporate benefit of being readily amenable to marketing campaigns, as we have seen with the greenification of the billboard industry in which the world’s most infamous polluters are now suddenly “green” and coal can miraculously become “clean.”

Moreover, the emphasis on consumerism is rarely remarked upon. Not only can individuals save the planet by buying more things, but the emphasis is on the

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,” wherein 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 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, that Phalagraphics’ 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 repressions, 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 worn in the blood of a vast (and often prosthetic) social organism.