THE MIGRATION OF IDEAS

Joakim Hällström  
Bachelor program  
Department of Fine Art  
Konstfack 2010
## Table of Contents

1. Introduction .........................................................1
2. Practice and methodology .........................................3
3. Exporting Comedy ....................................................5
4. Courage, Determination, Peace .....................................7
5. Penetrating ..............................................................9
6. An envisioning of future methods .................................10

Notes .............................................................................12
1. Introduction

It has been claimed that there was a clear correlation between the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the exponential growth and democratization of information technology in the later decades of the 20th century. The last head of state of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, admitted in 2005 that emerging decentralized electronic communication was “a big factor” for fostering democracy in the Soviet Union.¹

For my generation, born in the late 1980’s, computers and the Internet are used on a day-to-day basis and provide possibilities that, for the most part, lead to less dramatic consequences. On the other hand, I believe that these information technologies nevertheless force us to constantly reevaluate norms about the relationships between consumer and business companies and private and public life.

My practice is founded in an examination of questions about media, popular culture, consumers and real events; more specifically how communication and trading systems between these “territories” are organized and what effects it has on culture. I will in this chapter give a description of recent developments in information technologies. Although brief and simplified, it serves to illustrate how they help to determine the ways in which we consume culture.

It may be impossible to summarize “post-Cold War culture” but one defining characteristic is the decreasing distance between the professional and the amateur. Today’s hackers and bedroom programmers may turn into tomorrow’s billionaire entrepreneurs, as a result of the information age. In this fairly new situation, cultural consumption, production and exchange of media often occurs in front of screens.

As the view of the consumer and the audience as passive entities becomes more nuanced, so too does old notions about visual communication and interaction. A 21st century citizen is equipped with different - some say significantly better - tools for reading, decoding and reacting to media than a person living in the early 1900’s.
The dreams of a totally transparent Internet/society, born in the minds of cyber pioneers in the 1980’s, have not yet crystallized. Neither have we seen a true, global “creative class” come to fruition. Despite this, one could sense that today’s consumers are to a large extent a cross between consumers and producers, givers and takers. American media scholar and professor at University of Southern California, Henry Jenkins, writes about this cultural and technological shift:

Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands. Not all participants are created equal. Corporations – and even individuals within corporate media – still exert greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers. And some consumers have greater abilities to participate in this emerging culture than others.

If there is any truth to this description, one must ask what the implications are for a society that is partially governed by a new set of puzzling rules. It is not always simple to map out a definitive answer of who will succeed in being heard and seen. As Jenkins writes, a power struggle still exists. Questions that are linked to these matters are part of the framework of my artistic practice.
2. Practice and methodology

The current global communication systems and their pervasiveness in society inform my practice in a direct way. I view popular culture and contemporary mass media as keys to a deeper understanding of politics, values, commerce and human relations. In a society characterized by communication technologies, such subjects are intertwined and complex. The process of unraveling connections and meanings while creating new ones through the use of these subjects is a major part of my practice. I work with these circumstances as a starting point for confronting the audience with my works.

There is an abundance of original source material online, some of which I use in my research. Information technologies also indirectly give rise to particular issues and phenomena that I comment on in my practice. These are carefully chosen, as my intention is to highlight and discuss specific phenomena and their significance in a vast, global sea of information.

By using a strategy where I appropriate visual modes of communication I exaggerate, recontextualize, manipulate and “twist” subject matters and objects. This strategy can encompass methods such as creating replicas or borrowing a style or a mode of production. Tying in with my previous mention of the line between professional and amateur techniques, I position my works in this space, this gap. I am copying and appropriating visual languages and modes of production while explicitly pointing out the homemade quality of the objects, just as much as the sleek, commercial sheen that surrounds them.

A distinct DIY approach is manifested in my works. It is a version of the philosophy “don’t hide the screw, show it.” It serves to illustrate the relationship between the private and the public sphere, the recipients and the manufacturers. In my view, a product is fully “realized” and set into motion once it has been filtered through these spheres, giving birth to a feedback loop between maker and consumer that coincidentally blurs the line between them.
Since the themes that I am examining in my practice are deeply rooted in an economical structure, my works tend to refer to commodities. I prefer to use the word “commodity” in a wider sense than a description of a physical object, however. Commodities are manufactured, exported/imported and eventually sold. Likewise, a post-industrial society produces knowledge, ideas and other information that, through various channels, are marketed, transformed, globalized and adapted.

I am concerned with the location of the “marketplace of ideas”, the “dematerialized commodities”. In *Democracy and the marketplace of ideas*, Erik Åsard and W. Lance Bennett writes:

> Relatively little has been written about how political institutions, mass communication systems, and cultural codes work together to regulate the marketplace of ideas, and in many cases, how these regulatory processes break down to create unstable communication environments.\(^5\)

Like any other product, some ideas fail and some succeed and eventually gain influence. While they may not be physical, they penetrate public discussion and make sophisticated marks inside the minds of the consumer and the citizen. I take into account the general public as a factor that helps in forming and completing theories or ideas. The creation and structure of the *zeitgeist* is a process that rests on this multi-faceted social activity.

In relation to this, the concept of the general public behaving as “commercial agents” is a building block in my practice: the public citizen as someone who is promoting and selling immaterial products (concepts, viewpoints, ideology et cetera) through the use and production of media. This is possible as a result of the accessibility of information technologies. If one dares to stretch this analogy of “commercial agents” even further, today’s citizens could possibly be viewed as “mobile businesses”.
3. Exporting comedy

Laughter is America's most important export.

-Walt Disney

The exhibition *Exporting comedy* was born out of my love for stand up comedy. After having watched a huge amount of shows on television and computers over the years, I chose to create an exhibition based on this subject. The physical distance between the comedians and myself had always been an intriguing aspect for me, a factor that is emphasized and exaggerated in the exhibition.

In *Exporting comedy* I examine the global phenomenon of stand up comedy and set up a connection between comedians, the audience/consumer and the system of production and distribution of goods.

The works presented in the exhibition consists of five installation pieces. Each one is distinguished from one another in terms of material and appearance, yet linked in an effort to reflect on the complications of exporting comedy. These objects either appropriate or reference settings and products associated with stand up comedy (late night talk shows, nightclubs, live DVDs) as well as materials that are commonly used when packaging and shipping products (cardboard boxes, Styrofoam).

A recurring theme throughout the show is my take on the comedian as a producer of jokes that are adapted to a market. Like all businesses, stand up comedy is not immune to repetition, quality control and notions of demand and supply.

While the comedian theoretically has the opportunity to say whatever he or she wants at any time during the performance, there is always an underlying risk of alienating the audience, losing ticket sales and eventually damaging one’s “brand”.
The risk becomes increasingly apparent the more popular and “international” a comedian becomes, since jokes about specific cultural issues and phenomena may get lost in translation.

In my view, the consumer plays an essential role in a system that continually produces comedians, jokes, situations and commodities. It is only through a live situation that a comedian can get direct feedback and accordingly adjust his or her “products”; they may sell well in certain contexts, but fail in others. A live audience might reasonably be the perfect setup for a comedian to conduct marketing research.

In order to incorporate “the marks of the consumer” into the works I have made the construction, arrangement and DIY quality of the installations evident. A human being has clearly manipulated these objects at some stage, even if some of them contain traces of mass production aesthetics and techniques.

In *Exporting comedy* I suggest that comedy is a form of intangible product that succumbs to an economical structure that is usually more prevalent in other industries, e.g. the fashion, food or automobile industry. The exhibition presents an investigation into the idea of stand up comedy (jokes, rants, political subtexts) being something that strives to be moved, disassembled and reassembled, like a piece of furniture.
4. Courage, Determination, Peace

In 2008 a missile was fired from a US Navy battleship, called USS Lake Erie. The purpose was to strike down and destroy a non-functioning US spy satellite 130 miles above the ocean. The mission was successful. Russia described this act at the time as “little more than a thinly veiled arms test.”

A photo depicting the moment of the missile launch soon began circulating. The picture was distributed and consumed online, just days after the event. The ship and the photo slowly penetrated a small part of the collective consciousness for a period of time when news of the launch – and later, subsequent discussion and reactions – made headlines.

Inscribed on the grey hull of the ship in blue letters, and visible in the background of the photo, is the text “Don’t give up the ship”. This motto originates from the War of 1812, a military conflict between the US and the British Empire. Captain James Lawrence of the US navy was mortally wounded in combat in 1813 and reportedly cried out his last order to his men: “Don’t give up the ship!” These famous last words have since become an unofficial motto for the American navy.

When taken out of their original context, photographs, pictures and text have a tendency to generate new meanings. For me, this proved to be true with the USS Lake Erie photo and my approach to it. The sentence “Don’t give up the ship”, painted on a modern battle cruiser, acted as a starting point for me to discuss this notion of contexts and how history is presented through mass media, reproductions in museums and in modern day military visual communication.

My work Courage, Determination, Peace takes its title from the shield and official motto of USS Lake Erie. This large sculpture is based around the photo of the missile launch and built to resemble a naval history museum object; a newly made prop that mimics a historically significant artifact. It is essentially a cutout of the part of the ship where the text “Don’t give up the ship” is placed.
The work has as a front and back, somewhat similar to a movie set piece, thus explicitly pointing out the construction of the work, the *illusion* of the scene, rather than hiding it.

In this installation I present a cross between the expressions that military forces, films and history museums utilize. German political theorist Hannah Arendt writes in her essay *Truth and politics* about the political lie and its status in contemporary mass media:

> The modern political lies deal efficiently with things that are not secrets but are known to practically everybody. This is *obvious* in the case of rewriting contemporary history under the eyes of those who witnessed it, but it is equally true in image-making of all sorts […] for an image, unlike an old-fashioned portrait, is supposed not to flatter reality but to offer a full-fledged substitute for it. And this substitute, because of modern techniques and the mass media, is, of course, much more in the public eye than the original ever was.\(^9\)

The enigmatic text “Don’t give up the ship” in *Courage, Determination, Peace* opens up to different interpretations, while the title of the work bears traits of heroic ancient mythologies - and paradoxically - a modern bureaucratic language.

I want to illuminate the intricate relationship between museums, the film industry and the military industry as forces that subtly and constantly change our perception of symbols, signs, images and historic truth.
5. Penetrating

The terms “truth” and “scientific truth” have been greatly disputed in the history and philosophy of science. Relativists and objectivists, among others, have argued over the ways scientific knowledge is accumulated and transferred. In my work *Penetrating*, I engage with questions of how scientific knowledge and the scientific enterprise is sold to a mass audience.

Science magazines usually have a reader base that consists of highly educated and trained professionals in different scientific fields; biology, physics, chemistry and so forth. The dense articles featured in these magazines are naturally aimed at experts, not laymen with an interest in science news and discussions. To fill this gap in the market, popular science magazines have the intention to focus less on “hard” facts and more on long stories and commercial applications of science. The target is a general audience, so prior knowledge in science is seldom necessary in order to enjoy these magazines. This is also true in other forms where popular science is presented, such as TV shows, books and websites.

*Penetrating* is a triptych of three different popular science magazines encased in glass plates and fastened at the bottom. They all stand erect and have an identical sized hole in the middle, thus creating a “tunnel” through the magazines.

The back of the magazines all display advertisements for products or companies that are not related to science, while the front covers show the respective titles of the magazines. The duality of the commercial and “pure” scientific aspect of these products is apparent.

My incisions in these magazines shape an imaginary tunnel that physically cuts through magazines that are filled with a type of “market designed knowledge”. In my view, popular science and its advocates persistently struggle not to distort information, while still trying to maintain its “salability” and commercial value.

The holes in the magazines can either be viewed as the consequence of an aggressive act or an attempt to metaphorically penetrate the domain of truth, knowledge and scientific information.
6. An envisioning of future methods

In the words of curator Debra Singer, German installation artist Josephine Meckseper “mines the increasingly overlapping domains of politics, war, corporate interest and consumerism.” Typical works by Meckseper “often take the form of sleek commercial window displays, leveling objects and ideas so that sink plungers are on par with perfume bottles and fashion ads with revolutionary manifestos and Marxists texts.”

The role that Meckseper embodies as an artist and the context she works in are of particular relevance in a discussion of my future practice. Her works are results of the process of assembling ready-mades, consuming products and creating sculptures from scratch. Like Meckseper, I am concerned with leveling ideas and objects and drawing attention to underlying connections of seemingly disparate phenomenon. However, I do not share her explicit and aggressive critique of consumer society.

Issues of representation are present in my practice and specifically in relation to how certain information travels and gains foothold. I wish to emphasize and explore this searching and tracking of ideology, propaganda, political theories and consumerist patterns even more in my practice.

By using recognizable items, objects and expressions linked to popular culture I aim to slowly and steadily create a personal lexicon or index of figures and themes. I want to develop an aesthetic vocabulary that is sensitive to impulses from current events and interdisciplinary discourses on media, technology and contemporary art.

When looking at possible future paths and methods that can inform my practice, the roles of the forger, the dilettante and the shopper all come to mind.

The forger goes to great lengths in his mission to copy an object as skillfully as possible with the intent to deceive and manipulate his surroundings. In art history and art criticism the metaphor of the forger is common.
If the forger is an expertly trained craftsman then the dilettante is the hobbyist, the amateur who occasionally engages with a field of knowledge.

The shopper, or consumer, is an ever-changing and sometimes mystifying character that I wish to analyze further in conjunction with my role as an observer, producer and buyer of goods and services.

I wish to embrace these sometimes contradictory roles and use them simultaneously in my art projects, hoping that each of them adds knowledge and depth to my practice.
Notes


Richard Florida, professor of regional economic development at Carnegie Mellon University and author of *The Rise of the Creative Class* explains this term:

“The super-creative core of this new class includes scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers, and architects, as well as the "thought leadership" of modern society: nonfiction writers, editors, cultural figures, think-tank researchers, analysts, and other opinion-makers. Members of this super-creative core produce new forms or designs that are readily transferable and broadly useful---such as designing a product that can be widely made, sold and used; coming up with a theorem or strategy that can be applied in many cases; or composing music that can be performed again and again.”


7 Ibid.


Various authors, *Creamier: Contemporary Art in Culture: 10 Curators, 100 Contemporary Artists, 10 Sources* (New York: Phaidon press, 2010) 165.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.