

## Susan Shantz: Polytypes

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In this new body of work, *creatures in translation*, Susan Shantz explores a wide range of ludic reproductions of a group of Japanese pots from the collection of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Her “reproductions” range from old fashioned, hand-rendered, 3D illustration technologies to a series of computer-generated three-dimensional printed forms using what is still an evolving technology. In a direct attack on high art notions, Shantz seems to cast back to the pre-photographic era with watercolour copies of the originals, which were in fact commissioned by her from another artist, Joseph Anderson. Computer renderings of the digital clay-modeling files are printed and manipulated as giant tole paper cutups, evoking not only this folk art tradition but also the humor and delight of children’s pop-up books. Old fashioned and kitsch media seem to mock the pretension of both heroic art and the latest high-tech modeling media.

Shantz’s new work demonstrates that “real” works of art can now be readily replicated, cloned as it were, from their cataloging data and manipulated into a plurality of new works. Just as Photoshop™ destroyed the *vérité* of the news photo, the artifact has become vulnerable to replication or distortion; the prototype becomes a polytype. But this is not necessarily something to be feared, as originality is no longer invested in the original but now blossoms in the diversity of the variations which derive from it.

The range and variety of “reproducibility” now explored by contemporary artists like Shantz, were unimaginable a hundred years ago when Walter Benjamin wrote what has become one of the best-known critical texts of the twentieth century. In the 1930s, Benjamin drew attention to “the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.”<sup>1</sup> In this influential text he reasserts the degree to which the impact of original works of art cannot be captured in printed reproductions. “In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in a particular place,” which he termed “the decay of the aura...”<sup>2</sup> It was an evolving text with which he was never quite satisfied. Ironically, as Benjamin was voicing his concern, artists were increasingly exploring mechanical reproduction as a vehicle of art making.<sup>3</sup>

As early as 1930 the Paris avant-garde bookseller Adrienne Monnier had challenged what she considered the elitist premise of Benjamin’s position.<sup>4</sup> The conversation between them took place in her shop where she sold and helped publish the *éditions de luxe* of avant-garde artists, both the Surrealists and others. Monnier pointedly raised the multiple nature of new art media such as photography, which she knew was a particular interest of Benjamin’s, indeed, in this passage he refers to it as his *bête noire*. But there were more radical developments; for example, Marcel Duchamp with his *Roto Reliefs*, *Green Box* and other pioneering multiples was charting a completely novel artistic praxis. Printed by commercial printers, these works deliberately eschewed the preciousness of the limited edition and traditional

craft materials and processes of the fine art graphic media. The Russian and German avant-garde artists of the inter-war era were also using commercial printing and unlimited editions to circulate to mass audiences what were in effect original works of art which were no longer reproductions but original in themselves. Benjamin termed this development “the reproduction of a work of art designed for reproducibility.”<sup>5</sup>

In reality the uniqueness of the work of art was even in Benjamin’s time a relatively recent preoccupation. From the Renaissance onwards, well into the nineteenth century, artists and their assistants produced multiple copies of successful works which were sold to demanding patrons. For example Titian’s atelier produced numerous versions of his most acclaimed works, many of which are only known in these copies, and prominent patrons who could afford “originals” saw no disgrace in pursuing such works. The Emperor Rudolph II, as well as kings Phillip IV of Spain, and Charles I commissioned and proudly displayed such copies. Nor was it considered shameful for successful artists to copy the works of their predecessors. Such copies were considered original works of art in their own right as an homage to the prototype. As well, engravings and casts of both classical and contemporary works circulated widely and were avidly collected by discerning connoisseurs.<sup>6</sup> All this would change when artists began to turn their backs on the academic tradition and novelty became the hallmark of genius with Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. The Modernist concept of the distinctive autograph of creative genius further asserted itself with Abstract Expressionism. Subsequently, both Dada and Pop artists responded with hostility to this idea, appropriating subjects from popular culture, especially advertising, and circulating their work in prints and multiples. These artists also used assistants to fabricate their work, a practice that has become so commonplace in contemporary art to now pass without note.

Despite its canonic status, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* has continued to be a focus of controversy. In his equally signal essays exploring simulacra in contemporary society, Jean Baudrillard sees nostalgia in Benjamin’s approach which he would also characterize as melancholic.<sup>7</sup> He traces the ubiquity of contemporary simulacra in everything --from the cloning body parts and animals to the replication of historic sites and landmarks by Disney World and Las Vegas -- as an almost viral replacement of authenticity with a degree of alienation on a scale unimagined by Benjamin. “It is the real that has become our true Utopia - but a Utopia that is no longer in the realm of the possible that can only be dreamt of as one would dream of a lost object.” He argues that “we live in a world where there is more and more information and less and less meaning... where ‘reality’ had been replaced by information.”<sup>8</sup>

Shantz has previously explored the terrain of “inauthentic” mass-produced objects in her artwork. In *Satiate* Shantz appropriated industrially produced domestic objects, mostly culinary or decorative vessels, to create a vision of consumer consumption and abundance.<sup>9</sup> And her *Technologies of Tenderness* explored not only new medical technologies but also employed industrial processes

in the fabrication of the works presented.<sup>10</sup> In her most recent corpus, *Creatures in Translation*, mechanical reproduction is not just an artistic medium; it has become the subject of her work itself.

In choosing these early twentieth-century Japanese Banko ware pots -- portraying a badger, a sparrow, a cluster of frogs, and various sea creatures -- for her exploration of new three-dimensional computer imaging technologies, Shantz has made an inspired choice. Banko ware itself reproduces the forms of the creatures it transforms into useful objects such as vases, pitchers, dishes and teapots.<sup>11</sup> Although produced primarily for export, catering to Western Orientalist enthusiasm, Banko carries forward older traditions of Japanese ceramics, which recast functional objects such as incense boxes and burners, vases, and culinary dishes with mimetic whimsy. The use of animals as a vehicle for humor and satire by mirroring human society is a venerable Japanese tradition in the arts.

Consider one of the earliest surviving Japanese narrative picture scrolls painted in the mid-eleventh century by the Buddhist abbot Toba Sojo. Now often called the first Japanese manga, the *Kokuyu*, (*Frolicking Animals Scrolls*), depicts foxes, badgers, monkeys, deer and a profusion of rabbits and frogs acting out the conventional activities of monks and lay people in temple precincts or on pilgrimage. Toba Sojo savages the decadence of Heian-era religious life in pictorial rather than literary form, for example, by painting a frog bodhisattva sitting in the lotus position surrounded by his fawning acolytes piously chanting sutras, while other monastic beasts feast, get drunk, frolic, and fornicate.<sup>12</sup> Recasting his contemporaries as beasties enables the artist to boost the level of caricature and to portray activities which would have been too vulgar and scandalous if he had portrayed them as human activities.

Japanese potters over the centuries applied similar humor to their work, and when the age of European exploration created a new market for imported luxury goods, East Asian porcelain and Japanese ceramics were of particular interest. European and North American consumers were fascinated by Japanese exports, many of which were calculated to appeal to preconditioned Orientalist expectations. And by the end of the nineteenth century, Banko ware, while largely hand-decorated and formed, also involved mechanical processes, a very simple early form of industrial production – clay pressed into molds permitting the replication of multiples of the same form in quantities to meet this growing demand for *Japonisme* as a marker of advanced fashion.

It is at this intersection of “design for industry” and the artists’ multiple that recent exploration of new imaging technology by artists such as Shantz can be situated. Artists have always been drawn to new technologies; in the seventies, for example, avant-garde artists quickly assimilated Polaroid and video photography, as well as photocopying, in radical new forms of expression. The proliferation of personal computers and the potential of accessible software such as AutoCAD and Photoshop were also quickly assimilated by artists. Recent developments in 3D imaging and printing technologies have begun to be used by sculptors in their

creative processes. Michael Eden's variations on classical European porcelains made by Additive Layer printing, is an example, but such works seems to be primarily engaged with the interrogation of high art/craft distinction.<sup>13</sup>

While Shantz' past work has considered aspects of fine art and craft, through appropriated domestic objects refracted through a feminist valorization of women's creative work, there is a deeper ambivalence in *creatures in translation*. This is not nostalgia for a lost authenticity, Baudrillard's melancholic perspective that can plague art/craft polemics. Rather what is evident here is a keen delight in the potential of these new technologies, which offer limitless possibilities for playful exploration. Like the abbot Toba Sojo, Shantz's humor informs her exuberant response to her subject matter – these wild creatures formed into domestic teapots. Hers is a gentle interrogation of the aura of the art commodity in a time when fashion, media and industry are ever-increasingly aligned. The resulting work is sophisticated, witty and charming, not only employing new technologies, but profoundly engaging with their ramifications.

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<sup>1</sup> Third Version in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2003, pp. 251-283.

<sup>2</sup> "The Work of Art..." p. 253, p. 255.

<sup>3</sup> His concern is shared by his contemporary art historians; see for example Bernard Berenson, *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance*, London: Phaidon, 1952, p. x.

<sup>4</sup> "Paris Diary", Feb. 4, 1930, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, Cambridge, 1999, p. 348.

<sup>5</sup> "The Work of Art..." p. 256. For his discussion of Dadaism in this context, see: pp. 266-267.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin of course understood this, see "The Work of Art..." p. 252. All this would change when artists began to turn their backs on the academic tradition and when novelty became the hall mark of genius with the Impressionism and post-impressionism. It is perhaps indicative that it was not until 1895 that "art forgery" became a criminal offence in France.

<sup>7</sup> *Simulacra*, University of Michigan Press, 1981, "Cloning," p. 91

<sup>8</sup> Op cit.

<sup>9</sup> *Satiare*, Lethbridge: Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 1998; with catalogue essay by Lucy Lippard and Renne Baert; see also *Satiare*, Regina: Mackenzie Art Gallery, 1998 with an essay by Timothy Long.

<sup>10</sup> *Technologies of Tenderness*, Medicine Hat: Medicine Hat Art Museum and Art Gallery, 1998, with an essay by Sigrid Dahle.

<sup>11</sup> Barry Till, *Fanciful Images: Japanese Banko Ceramics*, Victoria: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2013

<sup>12</sup> A filmed scan of the first of the four *Kokuyu* scrolls can be seen on Utube. The third and fourth scrolls are believed to be later imitations by another hand. There is a facsimile reproducing all four scrolls with an introduction by Hideo Okkydaira, Honalulu: East West Press, 1969.

<sup>13</sup> Eden's work is represented by Adrian Sassoon Gallery in London and can be seen on the Gallery's website.