False illusions: Animals, nature and consumerism

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FALSE ILLUSIONS:
ANIMALS, NATURE AND CONSUMERISM

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Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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INTRODUCTION

By using animals in the mass production of foods and products, the animal’s true identity and purpose is lost. Twentieth Century Consumer Society has forgotten the relationship that earlier generations experienced by breeding their own livestock for survival. Today’s consumers have taken their “freezer to oven” way of life for granted, and because of this have become desensitized to its effects on themselves and their perception of living animals. Advertisements for artificial foods and products have only added to the confusion by creating an illusion that is a convincing but false reality. As a result, we identify more with the visual advertisements of many manufactured products than with living animals.

The ideas expressed in this statement were written in support of the photographs and installation of my MFA thesis show. How I became interested in these ideas and consequently, how the work developed, comprises the discussion for my thesis report.
DISCUSSION

The ideas for my thesis evolved from a variety of sources, not all of which were successful or conclusive in their practical application.

The creative process is not strictly rational and therefore it is not surprising that in the beginning my objective was not clearly identified.

During the summer of my second year at R.I.T. I began to question why artificial replicas of living organic things, such as wood, grass and fruit, were being manufactured and then being sold to consumers.

The fact that these products were being sold in the marketplace convinced me that there must be a demand for them. What I couldn’t understand was why anyone would prefer to purchase an artificial replica instead of the real thing.

My concern grew into the fear that more and more organic things would be replaced with artificial replicas. If so, what influence would they have on our perception of reality? As the historian, Daniel Boorstin comments:

This is the age of contrivance. The artificial has become so common place that the natural begins to seem contrived... We begin to look on wood as “non-synthetic” cellulose. All nature is then is the world of the non-artificial. ¹

Further inquiry into this subject brought about new challenges. One was how to show the differences and similarities between the organic products of nature and their replicas photographically.

I began to photograph items purchased at the local Woolworth store: plastic fruit, flowers, grass and food objects. One afternoon, I threw a plastic orange at our rubber plant. I proceeded to take several exposures of the orange in flight with the plant in the background. As a result of this experiment I discovered how the medium of photography has contributed to our perception of things that may appear to be real but in reality are not. The blurred image of the plastic orange seems no less real than the living plant. Therefore the two dimensional photograph only adds to the confusion in our perception of reality.

Later that same week I photographed some plastic flowers which I repeatedly threw in front of a field of wild flowers. The plastic flowers seemed to melt together in the sky while the background stayed in focus. The element of
chance during the action of the picture taking along with the juxtaposition of the artificial and real flowers provided a point of departure for my thesis.

By this point, I had discovered that photography in advertising had played a key role in our visual response to the products being sold on the market. My early experiments revealed the power of the photographic medium and its ability to transform the physical appearance of its subject into an illusion of a three dimensional reality.

The main premise of my thesis is that consumers in Western society have become misinformed about the sources of food they eat.

I believe that we identify more with the visual imagery of packaging and products than with the actual sources of much food — living animals. I also believe that a consequence of this dilemma will be an increasing apathy towards and disregard for Nature.

By “Nature” I mean all animal and organic living beings created on the planet earth, including man and woman who’s survival depends on the delicate balance between all living things.

It is a question of what do we, as consumers, really identify with when we prepare or order a meal containing animal products. Are we eating the real thing or is it a derivative substance full of preservatives or additives?

When we see an advertisement for a package of wieners do we consciously associate a wiener with a pig?

It is my opinion that the photographic image in the advertisements of that product have disguised the identity of the real source.

Mark Johnstone, in his article, Melting the Material World, has this to say about the media’s influence on the consumer’s perception of images in advertising.

Images, as in advertising can become more important, than the product they represent... There is little, if any, attempt by the average viewer to cope with what may lie beyond immediate appearances. ²

I believe that photographic images in advertising have blurred the distinctions between reality and illusion, and because of this, illusion has begun to
overlap more and more in an increasingly filtered reality. In an age of image pollution we are faced with the problem of defining what is a real experience separated out from reconstructed information in the media.

Photographs in the media represent the identity of a product differently than our own experiences. For example, in many advertisements for "frozen dinners" we are told that a gourmet chef has prepared them for us, and that the elite of the consumer market should want to eat them. From my own experience, "frozen dinners" have never tasted like they were prepared by a chef and despite their claim of celebrity status, I doubt whether an "elite" consumer would serve such a product to their dinner guests.

Daniel Boorstin, in his book, The Image, gives an in depth view of advertising and how illusion has taken over our perception of reality.

In this new world, where almost anything can be true, the socially rewarded art is that of making things seem true. It is the art not of discovery, but of invention. Finding a fact is easy; making a fact "believed" is slightly more difficult. The greatest effort goes into the realization not of dreams, but of illusions. God makes our dreams come true. Skillful advertising men bring us our illusions, then make them seem true. 3

As the issues grew more complex, so did my attempts at image making. I had decided to try still life set-ups, using the same basic elements as before. The first photographs included a milk carton painted white with cow spots, fenced in with ground beef magazine cut-outs and roasted chickens floating in front of a painted sky.

Although I was pleased with the results, the entire process was too controlled and lifeless. I did try other set-ups after this one but decided I needed more variables and living animals to counteract with their processed products.

Another factor that determined my approach involved the use of humor and satire, instead of a graphic documentary style. Humor attracts rather than repels our attention in the image. The use of humor in advertising was also a consideration, since my photographs were dealing with the way images in advertising confuse our understanding of reality and illusion.

My choice to use color photographic materials instead of black and white also relates to the influences used in advertising. Bright saturated colors have a
strong seductive quality which appeals to the average viewer. My personal view is that color represents an illusory effect and black and white imagery reveals a more somber reality. Using and carefully controlling color in my photographs emphasized the illusion of the image.

Following my experimentation with still-life set-ups, I decided to return to my original idea of photographing the thrown imitation in front of the living subject.

Since I believe that the consumer identifies with the replicas and processed products of Nature more than the living animals, or real materials, throwing a painted milk carton in front of living cows was an attempt to show the confusion of identity between the two.

My investigation into the influence of advertising on the perceptions of consumers prompted a more detailed examination of the pretensions of magazine and newspaper ads. What began with a selection of roasted chicken and hamburger meat magazine cut-outs (that had been included in the still-life set-ups) evolved into a series of large collages. This series would accompany the photographs and installation of my thesis show. The collages consisted of images taken from food advertisements and with them I created parodies of the original messages in the ads. For instance, I place a shopping cart filled with food next to a woman who is counting off the days that her toilet bowl cleaner has worked, and above, a slogan that says, “I Love My Coupons.”

By re-contextualizing the message on the ad I was trying to create a parody of the product and change the meaning of the original ad. Again as with the photographs it was my intent to reveal the confusion that is created by images used in advertising.

The image itself is more often than not a glorified facsimile of the product it represents in the advertisement. Car advertisements will often associate their products with race cars or beautiful women dressed in formal gowns. The average consumer is not a race car driver nor do they wear formal gowns to drive their K-cars to the supermarket. The connotations planted by advertisers are there to lure the consumer into believing that these fantasies could be realized once the product is purchased.

Once again, I will refer to Boorstin to support my claim that today’s consumers identify more with facsimile rather than its actual source:
The fantastic growth of advertising and public relations together with every body's increasing reliance on dealers in pseudo events and images cannot — contrary to high-brow cliches accurately be described as a growing superficiality. Rather these things express a world where the image, more interesting than its original, has itself become the original. The shadow has become the substance.

It was the fantasy of the image in the magazine advertisements that I wanted to unmask in my collages. I continued to work on the collages for four months before taking more photographs.

During this time I produced twelve collages which would be taken through several more stages before being included in the installation of my thesis show. First, I had 30” x 40” black and white xerox enlargements made of the color cut-out collages. By taking away the color, a vital part of the images identity and appeal was neutralized. The larger scale would enhance the visual impact of the parodies I had created in the collages. At this point the xerox copies were recollaged in larger strips onto a black background. From there I constructed a large black figure measuring 24-1/2’ x 7-1/2’, covered with the xerox collages.

The figure symbolizes my struggle with advertising imagery and how it has altered my own perception of reality and identity. The color black is symbolic of the “death” of my own vision and, consequently, of my ability to discern truth.

Before describing the final installation of the figure, I will continue with the progress of the photographs used in my exhibition.

While in Cedar Falls, Iowa, I photographed hogs and weiners and images of a fish hatchery. On my return to Rochester I had a problem gaining access to places where I could photograph live animals. This situation was very significant because it emphasized the isolation between rural and urban cultures. Unless you grew up on a family farm how could you acquire the experience of daily contact with farm animals? This isolation of experience is most apparent in the display of animals in captivity in large cities. John Berger, in his essay “Why Look at Animals?” has written:

Public zoos came into existence at the beginning of the period which was to see the disappearance of animals from daily life. The zoo to which people go to meet animals, to observe them, to see them, is, in fact a monument to the impossibility of such encounters. Modern zoos are an epitaph to a relationship which was as old as man.
The animal parks or zoos have taken the animals outside of their own environment and made them prisoners to be gazed at our convenience and for our entertainment and edification.

One issue that can be compared more readily to my thesis topic is the use of stuffed animal toys as a popular commodity for children.

The increase in the popularity and production of realistic animal toys occurred at the same time as the establishment of public zoos, at the beginning of the industrial revolution during the mid nineteenth century.

The stuffed bears, monkeys, tigers and "farm" animals have become substitutes for the absence of a variety of animals from our daily lives.

This displacement of Nature is additional proof of how we have chosen to create our own artifice based on an absent (or distant) reality.

Luckily for me, a fellow MFA student's father was a veterinarian. With his help I was able to visit farms and continue my image making. With the experiences that followed came a renewed sense of purpose. The belief in my ideas strengthened and everything seemed to fall into place.

Upon completion of my first day of photographing farm animals I felt I had reached a new level of awareness. Having grown up in the sterile environment of the suburbs this was the first time I had experienced a "bond" with cows, hogs and sheep. The interaction was so powerful I physically began to shake. On looking back I realize I had been both angry and afraid of their impending deaths in the slaughter houses. My memory of that day is still as strong as the lingering scent of the animals on my clothes.

When you are face-to-face with a living animal you cannot deny its existence. It is the lack of acknowledgement of Nature through sensual experience that has separated our perception of the reality of the living animal from its facsimile or use in food products. Within the structure of our society it is very difficult to nurture any kind of close bond with animals that are bred for consumption.

In modern, self-contained breeding farms, the chickens and pigs never leave the buildings until it is time to be shipped to the packaging plants. From birth to packaging, we are prevented from validating the authenticity of life and death of animals bred to be part of the food chain.
High technology coupled with the forces of advertising are dictating a future with simulated environments, self-contained metal enclosures that will continue to breed more animals for consumption. In addition to this they will teach us how to fly a plane, sail a boat, or drive a car, all substitutes for the real thing. It won’t be long before we can create our own version of reality inside personal simulators so that we, too, will live and die in an artificial reality.

This is how the writer, Jann Wenner, describes this kind of future:

We are being cut off from our biological past which moulded the eyes and the brains of our ancestors. The Intelligent Eye is for the first time confronted with an unpredictable future, whose present objective hypotheses are bound to fail. As we create so much we adapt to what we have created. The danger is that we may create a world beyond the restraints of our intelligence: a world we cannot see. 6

We have not caught up with the effects of industrialization, yet we continue to race forward into the world of automation and electronic encoding. The danger is no longer simply the isolation from Nature but from ourselves. This idea relates to the black figure which is a reminder of the effects of Capitalism and how it has drastically altered our perception of the Natural World.

The animals and manufactured replicas that I chose to photograph for my thesis show included: cows/cow painted milk carton; cows/plastic hamburger; pigs/plastic hot dog; sheep/synthetic wool; chickens/rubber chicken and candy colored egg; fish/styrofoam painted fish.

The decision was made to present each animal/facsimile in a triptych. This way, the position of the replica in the foreground appears to be moving from left to right taking up more of the animals’ pictorial space as it goes from one print to the next. The replica also becomes more indistinguishable as it gets larger, or more blurred, however, the animals are in sharp focus throughout. Repetition and the illusion of blurred movement were techniques I had observed in advertising. It was my intent to reverse the message in my photographs as I had attempted with the advertisements in the collages. Even though the product imitation may obstruct our clear vision of the animal, it is the animal that remains vivid. The confusion of identities between the two is measured by our ability to see reality and not be blinded by illusions of it.

I had included a shopping cart as part of the installation, but felt it needed to be represented photographically as well.

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I returned to the field where I had found the shopping cart and began to take photographs. For me, this photograph was going to tie together all of the elements in the show. The image that I selected had an overturned shopping cart covered in grass and old newspaper ads. In the left hand corner my shadow resembles the black figure. Here, the grass (Nature) is obscuring the identity of the shopping cart, which represents consumerism. The shadow and newspaper ads represents the loss of our ability to identify with Nature.

The contradictions of the two points were intentional. The photograph represents both the power of Nature and consumerism equally. The decision to choose which of the two is more influential in our lives is left up to the viewer. I hung this photograph opposite the space I had constructed for the main body of photographs and collage figure.

The real shopping cart was positioned in the centre of a square made up of four free standing walls. (See Diagram A and slides) The square was used to symbolize a packaged product. The shopping cart was lined with clear plastic, and filled with dirt. The objects I had used in my photographs were placed in the baby compartment. The dirt inside the cart symbolized consumer societies’ attempt to buy Nature. The display of the objects was first hand, experiential evidence of their artificial make-up. The confusion of the products’ identity in the photographs is removed with the physical presence of the real objects.

The photographs of the animal products were hung in six sets of three (triptych) on the inside walls of the square. The outside walls were covered with three layers: the first, newspaper ads, the second clear plastic and lastly the black figure. The newspaper ads and plastic were used to give the appearance of layers used for packaging consumer goods. The space surrounding the square represented the “outside of the marketplace”. Except for the shopping cart photograph the walls surrounding the square were left bare.

My decision to create a feeling of empty space was initiated by the artist Barbara Kruger, who had said, “I began to realize that outside the marketplace there is nothing.” 7 Kruger was referring to the visual intensity of the inside of stores and shopping malls versus the banal appearance outside in the city streets which seem empty compared to the visual chaos inside the market place.

The empty space around the black figure reinforces the absence of Nature, in the Western world which substitutes illusion for reality.
CONCLUSION

In retrospect I have come to realize that certain aspects of my thesis show were less successful than others. The sheep/synthetic wool photographs were not as visually effective as the pig/plastic hot dog triptych. The wool seems less threatening and disconnected from the sheep where as the plastic hot dog does appear to take over the identity of the pigs which was my original intent.

I also regret not having shared my ideas with my thesis board on a more regular basis. The process of resolving the problems that take place during the creative process can be a lot more difficult when you are determined to take on the responsibility independently of your board members. Now that I am no longer a student and am teaching I have a better understanding of the importance of open communication to encourage creativity and personal growth.

Overall I feel I have benefited a great deal from this experience. I have gained a better understanding and awareness of animals and environmental issues. I am more confident in expressing my ideas visually both as an artist and photographer, and I now have the opportunity to educate others which I feel is a continuation of my intellectual and artistic growth.

In the future, I hope to pursue my efforts concerning issues of the Natural environment, and how the forces of consumer society and industry have contributed to its’ erosion.
Selected Bibliography


Foucault, Micheal. This is Not a Pipe. University of California Press, 1982.


Footnotes


4. Boorstin, 204.


APPENDIX
APPENDIX A

Thesis Proposal

Purpose

I want to emphasize the disposable aspects of 20th Century consumer society.

Background

The influence of the media’s visual illusions of reality plays a key role in how we perceive Nature.

Society has become desensitized to Nature, divorced from the slaughter of animals for human consumption. The by-products of Nature, such as packaged meats and frozen vegetables are identified with more than their living counterparts. Products often carry labels such as ‘100% Natural’ or ‘Real Meat’ to confuse the issue and ultimately the consumer. The same applies to the use of visuals, instead of words by association, photographs are used to give the illusion of something the product is not. Driven by hard sell advertisers the consumer builds castles of waste and watches Nature like a blurr through their car windows and color t.v.’s

There is a fine line between reality and illusion and I believe illusion has begun to overlap more and more into an increasingly filtered reality.

Procedure

I intend to bring visual reality together with objects and images from the media to represent this overlapping of real and unreal things.

I will also attempt to create a visual parody of this idea by literally throwing objects at the landscape which also represents the illusion of stability.

I have chosen to use color transparency and Cibachrome materials for the presentation of my thesis show that will be held in The Photo Gallery at R.I.T. I may also include an installation of the objects that will be thrown at the landscape.
APPENDIX B
APPENDIX C

Works Sited - Wallace Memorial Library


APPENDIX D

List of Slides - MFA Thesis Show

Installation

1. Collage, front view.
2. Collage, left side view.
3. Collage, right side view.
5. Interior view.

Triptych

1. Cows and painted milk carton.
2. Fish and painted fish.
3. Pigs and plastic hot dog.
4. Chickens and candy eggs with rubber chicken.
5. Sheep and synthetic balls of wool.
6. Cows and plastic hamburger.

Single Image

1. Grass and broken shopping cart.