Assignment 1

The Interaction of Media
15\textsuperscript{th} January 2016

- Find three examples of visual artists whose practice and/or imagery are, or have been, influenced by new media (photography, film, television, radio, electronic or digital media) since the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century.

- Choose one or more of these works to analyse in more depth. Try to find out why these artists work in their chosen medium rather than traditional painting, sculpture, etc. Write about 1000 words.
Title

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1. Man Ray – L’etoile de Mer (1928)

Fig 1. Screen shot from L’etoile de Mer (1928) by Man Ray

Man Ray, in a documentary by Jean-Paul Fargier (1998), explains that he is really all about ideas. He adds he always referred to himself as a painter first and foremost, despite probably being known best for his photography, and the fact that his long-standing friend, Duchamp, repeatedly advised him to abandon painting altogether. His films are typically surrealist in that they do not follow traditional story patterns, as described by James Magrini in his essay, L’etoile de Mer: A Philosophical Reading (2001): “The Surreal cinematic experience was unique in cultivating the spectator’s involvement, yet allowing the “consciousness of fiction” to remain operative; this is a belief in the authenticity of the images and the simultaneous realisation of their status as illusionary. This produces within the viewer a phenomenon of what may be termed the condition of “dreamlike wakefulness.” Within this semi-hypnotic psychic state the associative processes of the mind function without the traditional structures of symbolisation.”

Man Ray’s work L’etoile de Mer is perhaps more successfully dreamlike and less contrived than Dali’s in Un Chien Andelou; which albeit lighter and humorous in parts, seems rather more clunky. I like the comedy in the latter but the more robust
strangeness in Man Ray’s work is bolder and richer for me. The film is a short exploration into subjective sensations relating to sex, war and death. The starfish is symbolic of a hybrid of non-specific sexuality and the narrative appears to explore tension that exists between the human animal’s urge to procreate with or else destroy each other, or possibly even to procreate in order to destroy.

The filtered scenes (which look to be shot with lenses covered in a great deal of Vaseline) are in Magrini’s reading representative of “phenomenal reality from which the artists sought to disassociate themselves”. However, the unfiltered scenes are no less easy to pin down into anything resembling “traditional or commercial cinema, which was modelled on the great Aristotelian “triangle” of the Western literary arts”.

These films are about pre-conscious sensation and recognition. L’etoile de Mer is attempting an expression of pre-language, as maybe a good deal of imagery does in varying degrees¹, and unlike so much earlier western visual and textual art, abandons traditional literary constructs and narratives.

One thing I must say is that even though great effort was made to overcome “logical constructs of oral or written communication”[5], male and female roles seem exactly as they might have been within that era. Kiki of Montparnasse couldn’t be more of a symbol of objectified women, i.e. a sex thing.

I can see Man Ray’s influence everywhere and in particular in Mapplethorpe’s erotic flower photographs.

¹ While preparing this assignment into a hard copy for submission at the end of the UVC course, this statement seems entirely misconstrued, and in fact were I to rewrite the sentence I think I would refer to much of Post-Modern art rather than imagery in relation to the way artists have attempted to explore pre-symbolic values.
2. Hannah Höch – Various

Hannah Höch’s collage work is a direct response to the technological advances in print that allowed for mass production of images and a proliferation of the visual. The Whitechapel’s accompanying book introduces the Dadaists as a group who “set out to embrace the noise of the city, the turmoil of the vast political change of their time, and the huge increase in imagery which photography in the age of mass production was prompting.” (2014) According to Daniel F Herman, who wrote the introduction, the Dadaists “would take up ‘scissors and cut out all that we require from paintings and photographic representations…” (2014) – a direct challenge to the old way of doing things.

I very much like Höch’s statement, “that the purpose of art is not to ‘decorate’ or to replicate reality through ‘naturalistic little flowers, a still life or a nude, but to act as a document of the ‘spirit’ and the changing value of a generation.” (2014)

I am, of course, particularly interested in the process of alienation that Höch works with. She challenges notions of female sexuality, sometimes, as Herman suggests, using humour (2014) in collages where ludicrous female representation, common in magazines still today, is satirised as in Auf dem Weg zum siebenden Himmel (On the Way to Seventh Heaven) 1934 or Marlene 1930. Or she chooses to leave the alienation unresolved, and that in Herman’s words is more unsettling. Her Ethnographic Museum series is a case in point. For example, Mutter (Aus einem ethnographischen Museum) (Mother from an Ethnographic Museum) 1925-26 is a difficult and upsetting picture that communicates a variety of unsettling feelings.

Fig 2. Little Sun ©Hannah Höch/Artists Right’s Society (ARS), NY, 1969
about the role of Mother; depression, ennui, hidden sense of self. Physical difference, which when considering the social preoccupation with perfection immortalised later by the Nazi’s in their Eugenics programme, is daring and subversive. I am interested in the Ethnographic Museum series as it explores some of the questions I have been asking myself about the relationship between the rich West (with histories that include Empire, slave trade, land acquisition etc.) and peoples from other parts of the world. Hoch explores and pokes fun at our fears and suppositions; she evokes our horrors and ridicules them, as in Ohne Titel, aus der Serie: aus einem ethnographischen Musem (untitled from the series: From an Ethnographic Museum) 1929

The misogyny that existed so casually in the early part of last century did not escape Dadaism and Hoch’s work was pushed aside in our collective history in favour of louder male egos. But as Mark Hudson in The Telegraph tells us, “A pioneer of photomontage, whose images of women presaged the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir and Second Wave Feminism half a century later, Hoch was a pivotal figure in Dada,” (2014).
3. Martha Rosler – Semiotics of the Kitchen 1975

Video is an excellent medium for women artists because, especially in the 70s, it was relatively new, and is according to Vanalyne Green in her essay, Vertical hold: A History of Women’s Video Art, “as close to a ‘master-free’ zone as one could get”.

Semiotics of the Kitchen is a six-minute video shot in black and white, with relatively low-production standards (deliberate presumably); a pastiche referring to contemporary cooking shows, in particular Julia Childs’ which was well known in the States at the time. Rosler stands behind a recognisable kitchen set blurt out words in alphabetical order as she picks up the objects she mentions. The objects are all kitchen utensils but here they become weapons, perhaps instruments of torture, as her body-movements jerk about and her passive face hardly changes at all, until the very end when she shrugs. The work investigates signs and signifiers common to female representation and suggests that all is not as rosy in the kitchen as the usual programme the video is based on might suggest. As Rosler says, “Feminism is a world view, or a great factor in such a perspective. It is a viewpoint that demands a rethinking of questions of power in society and thus has undeniable potency. Semiotics of the Kitchen, a sort of bizarrely humorous six-minute black-and-white video from December 1974 (dated 1975), was one part of a large body of work in several media that I had been doing taking on questions of women, society, and art through the medium of food and the culture of food preparation and
consumption. The video is ‘a lexicon of rage and frustration’ produced through a noisy and slightly unruly alphabetic demonstration of some hand tools in the traditional kitchen” (Barragán n.d).

Again I am struck by Brechtien alienation here – by making us see those utensils as dangerous, painful and torturous, we are asked to question the relationship between men and women in our society, the way in which women are positioned and the at-best infuriating, at-worst destructive and damaging effects. And subsequently, if true to Brecht’s intentions, prompted to do something about it.

**Conclusion**

In the years between Man Ray’s use of film to express his ideas and Rosler’s use of video much had changed for women in art. Kiki of Montparnasse played a passive role in his film, representing a male fantasy and with little agency over how she was represented. At a similar time Höch was subverting those conceptions and looking at how broken and fragmented those roles could be. She questioned representation of both sexes as well as positions engendered by class, difference, history and place. She did the groundwork for later artists such as Martha Rosler who unlike Kiki were able to vocalise and challenge similar subjects, as society shifted and the role of women in it began to change substantially. All three artists made use of technology that was not available to earlier artists, taking advantage of opportunities they provided and doing away with some aspects of the old.
Reflection:

Demonstration of subject knowledge: I think I have demonstrated a reasonably good grasp of the subject although I struggled to stay within the 1000 words and went over a little. I would like to have said a great deal more but know I must learn to edit more effectively

Demonstration of research skills: I know I do a lot of research and really enjoy it. I’d like to have the time to do far more though and research deeper. I still feel it’s all pretty superficial really. Saying that when I read my notes from TAOP I do see how much I have learned and appreciate that I have a growing repertoire of knowledge building up.

Demonstration of critical evaluation skills: I can hazard guesses based on other experience and knowledge. I am looking forward to expanding my interpretive skills so that I can write more effectively and fluently. I respond to things intuitively and transferring that into a succinct essay is challenging. Sometimes my responses to people’s work is extremely visceral and breaking that down into language is challenging.

Communication: I’m good at this although it is hard work and requires a lot of time and thought on my part. I enjoy it but get frustrated when the thoughts aren’t able to flow out of my head onto the screen easily. I think when that does happen though, my communication skills are at their best.

Research, notes and thoughts:

My A’level Theatre Studies tutor, Charles, must have been an effective teacher since so much of what he taught in the late 80s has made such a long-lasting impression on me. I remember learning about surrealism and montage in his class, and being shown Un Chien Andelou in preparation for looking at some of Brecht’s work.

Brechtian theory links in to the people and ideas that grew out of those movements and was someone whose work I seemed to understand instinctively when writing about it during my A’ levels. Looking back, for understandable reasons, I struggled academically. However, writing about Brecht seemed the only time I was able to do so with ease and fluidity, gaining good marks that were otherwise less than average.

During my degree at what was Manchester Polytechnic (later Manchester Metropolitan University) I was fortunate to be in a production of The Threepenny Opera, directed by Bill Hopkinson. Actually, the rehearsal process then was difficult. I was an emotional disaster area at the time so it didn’t feel lucky during it, but like my studies with Charles, I have retained a great deal from the experience.

Following graduation I absolutely loved my first acting job, employed by Manchester University, which was a re-enactment of the Cabaret Voltaire. In a company made up of a small group of graduates, we rehearsed a selection of Dadaist poems, songs and sketches. The head of the course we’d been on came along and said she was so pleased to see us own the work so effectively. It was a great first job.
Nearly 20 years later, the first study visit I went to with the OCA was to see Hannah Höch at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2014. I wasn’t even looking forward to it really. Collage genuinely seemed in my woefully uneducated mind to be almost childish and I thought I’d be underwhelmed. However, I have to say I was blown away by her work. I immediately saw how very wrong I had been. All the themes and ideas, her rendering of them, especially with the early work that was done under the banner of Dada grabbed me with an intensity that I had not expected at all.

I was thrilled to notice the very obvious influences of Freud and Jung, whose work I now know was intrinsic to Dada and Surrealism. I wrote in my TOAP blog, “The other thing that struck me was how much her work seemed to allude to ideas explored by the psychoanalytical movement. I think this is hardly surprising due to her place on the timeline of Western History, and because the Surrealists, well known for their links to Freudian dream theories, and the Dadaists are closely related although the latter are known to be more anarchic and political. I was instantly reminded of the Jungian concepts I recently read about, in a wonderful book called A Very Short Introduction to Carl Jung, of fragmented, un-individuated personalities especially when looking at images such as Gerhard Hauptman (1919) and The Father (1920) – which also speak to me of societies in the same state, so the collages work on a micro and macro level. The whole process of collage seems to lend itself wonderfully to an illustration of Jung’s ideas. Or perhaps rather they each tap into something that was happening to the outer and inner worlds for humanity at the time.” (2014)

During the time I have been studying with the OCA, almost exactly 2 years now, I have found that my interests are repeatedly drawn to work made during the early years of last century where artists were experimenting with the new and rejecting the old. Because of that I am going to talk about two artists from that period; Man Ray, because his work covers a vast array of mediums (although I will focus on photography and film) and also because I like it very much. I am very aware that the role of women in Man Ray’s work represents a narrative that is unpalatable to feminists. I have deliberately chosen his film L’etoile de Mer (1928) as it will serve as a strong contrast to the two other artists I will talk about.

My second artist is Hannah Höch, whose collage work could not have been made prior to the technological printing processes that developed so rapidly in the late 19th century and early 20th. Although I have already written about her during TAOP I have not looked at any single work in great detail. She provides a good opportunity to look at a women’s work from the same period I discussed, which is, from what I have read, well known for its misogynistic attitudes which were so acceptable and usual in those days (and still present today; openly in many arenas and beneath the surface in others, despite us all having come a long way since then.)

I was going to discuss Nan Goldin and The Ballad of Sexual Dependency which was shown as a slide show as a well as being produced as a book. She’s really interesting
to me and I like that her work grew out of the tail end of the Punk movement which has been linked to Dada, both movements utilising new technologies as they emerge – to question and subvert the status quo. I also loved the way in which the title would link back to my love of Brecht’s work, *Threepenny Opera*, which I mentioned at the beginning of this. But in the end I felt I should venture further from photography. So, I have instead chosen Martha Rosler’s *Semiotics of the Kitchen* which I read about in an essay titled, *Vertical hold: A History of Women’s Video Art* by Vanalyne Green. (1997)

This allows me to continue exploring my interest in feminine discourse and gives a clear idea about the sort of work I would like to learn from. Video also seems a good area to look at women’s work because, as explained by Green, the medium was new, and not yet dominated by anyone of either sex.

“The introduction of the electronic medium of video occurred as feminism, the most important philosophical movement of the 20th Century, was once again entering the public consciousness of America, this time as the Second Wave. Video offered new possibilities for women no longer content to be known as male artists’ wives or girlfriends; there were no “founding father” mythologies because no one took video seriously as an art medium. True, men were still capable of self-mythologizing, but they had not yet been historicized in coffee table books about the 20th Video was as close to a “master-free zone” as one could get. (1997)

*A description of Semiotics from Electronic Art Intermix: “Semiotics of the Kitchen* adopts the form of a parodic cooking demonstration in which, Rosler states, “An anti-Julia Child replaces the domesticated ‘meaning’ of tools with a lexicon of rage and frustration.” In this performance-based work, a static camera is focused on a woman in a kitchen. On a counter before her are a variety of utensils, each of which she picks up, names and proceeds to demonstrate, but with gestures that depart from the normal uses of the tool. In an ironic grammatology of sound and gesture, the woman and her implements enter and transgress the familiar system of everyday kitchen meanings — the securely understood signs of domestic industry and food production erupt into anger and violence. In this alphabet of kitchen implements, states Rosler, “when the woman speaks, she names her own oppression.”(1995)
Bibliography:


Images

