

Different Speculations on How to Transport a Poem

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W. J. T. Mitchell argues that image cannot be separated from its materials. Without objects there are no images, and without images, there are no objects.¹ This idea, irrefutable, is provocative for the image maker and encourages people to imagine.

Let us start with an example. If we were to remove a poem from the book where it appeared and transport it to another space, what would be the possible mechanism of such a move? This question remains intrinsically tricky. We may think that poetry is not dependent on space or not unique as a painting is, that it simultaneously exists on the surfaces of all copies of the book. We may find ourselves amidst the endless form-versus-content paradoxes of the past.

*'I can, for example, burn up a copy of the book in which a poem is printed, but it is far from clear that in so doing I have burned up the poem, since it seems plain that though the page was destroyed, the poem was not; and though it exists elsewhere, say in another copy, the poem cannot merely be identical with that copy. For the same reason, it cannot be identified with the pages just burned.'*²

This debate brings another to mind: the conundrum of the Ship of Theseus. The ship that belongs to the victorious hero Theseus has been kept in a harbour as a museum piece for a long time. As the years go by, the wooden structure of the ship rots and the decayed pieces are replaced with new ones. At a certain point, there is no piece left that has not been replaced. In this case, is the ship still the Ship of Theseus, or is it a different one? Heraclitus' answer to this thought exercise is that everything changes under every condition anyway. One moment of the ship is not the same as the next. Even if the ship is not reconstructed it is still not the same ship, thus there

¹ W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? : The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

² Danto, Arthur C. 1981. *The transfiguration of the commonplace: a philosophy of art*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. Danto gives another example from theatre: *"I can hit the man who plays Hamlet with a ripe tomato, but I cannot hit Hamlet with one (...); who remains unsullied by the attack and can indeed only be touched by such as Laertes."* p.34.

is no paradox to speak of. As for Aristotle, he argues that the ship remains; it is the same ship since its function, shape, and maker has not changed.

Another example is the ship Santa Maria, one of the three ships on which Christopher Columbus sailed.. During one of his expeditions near Haiti, the ship was damaged beyond repair. The pieces from the wreck were used in the building of a fort named La Navidad. What strikes us in this story is the way that the function in an ideological sense is sustained by its transference from the ship to the fort. This presents an important clue: should we be including ourselves in the questions we ask?

Creating new connections, artworks enable the debates on the issues of form and reproduction that are mentioned in these narratives. A question that is more poetical than transporting a poem is thus envisioned when we encounter the work. What does it mean to relocate a river? Heraclitus, who argues that we cannot step in the same river twice, would answer this question in the same way he resolves the question related to the Ship of Theseus. We all witnessed the relocations of historical artefacts and buildings. But how can a geographical component that is in constant motion be transported and relocated? If we were to fill a vessel with the running water of the river and carry it somewhere else, we would only be speaking of the water, not the river itself. This means that transporting the material can never be the same as transporting the system. The forms of relations, the connections should also be carried over. Moreover, a river is much more than a mere geographical entity. For example, when we think of the Ganges, we often think of the culture related to it rather than merely the river itself.

There are always certain levels of abstractions in the acts of transporting, dislocating, transforming and reconstructing. As the complexity of what is relocated increases (a river holds such a level of complexity), the level of abstraction in its representation rises too. It is not possible to transfer from one milieu to another without this abstraction. The words never have the same quantity of verbal dissolubility; a portrait painting can only show certain spatial relations of a face, a photography print can only reach a limited number of dots, etc. All abstractions include digitisation. The artists, who focus on the features of the techniques of transferring between forms, frequently work as analog-digital or digital-analog converters with complex rules. When we say 'digital', we should not only consider computers or electric circuits. Digitisation is a verbal 'translation'; it is a kind of abstraction. Samples are taken from a continuous pattern (for example a sound wave) and these samples are mapped in fewer and dispersed values. In other words, digitisation is the approximation of samples to predetermined ranges of value.



Guido Casaretto The Ghosts of Matter exhibition, photo: R. Sosin

This river consisting of hexagonal units (as hexagon is a very economic form for compression) running in front of us is also digitised; it is a sample river. Its hexagonal units allow for the construction of a structure that is dispersed, coded, jointed, modular and homogenous. Hence just like digital information, a river (both metaphorically and literally) can be put into a 'package' and be transported. This appearance is almost like a wave with huge pixels or a landscape seen by a species whose organs of sight are capable of seeing images with a lower resolution in comparison to the human eye. In principle, this procedure is theoretically very similar to the technique used by an impressionist painter painting a landscape. The painting is not the landscape itself. The painting is a map. Yet the resolution of this map is drastically different than the landscape we see with our own eyes. Most of the details are absent. Yet, we are still reminded of the landscape itself when we look at the painting. Some data from the landscape is moved to the surface of the canvas through the artist's mind and body, the physical qualities of the material. Here what we see in front of us is still a river. The mud and residuals of the river are frozen in the

hexagonal resins attaining new bodies, just like a poem published in a new book with a different kind of font.

Resin here functions as a material which stores the data in its memory, just like it is in nature. (The same is valid for computers or telecommunication networks; even when the method is digital, data is always engraved on a material). The function of resin is to hold on to this record. In this case, it is the digitalised river that can be transported to a different geographical location. The array of the hexagons is organised in a way to evoke a flow. The differences in their heights are reminiscent of the refractions of light formed by the current. We grasp that the form of the relation between what is relocated and its material is the abstraction of spatial connections.

Much but by no means all world making consists of taking apart and putting together, often conjointly: on the one hand, of dividing wholes into parts and partitioning kinds into sub-species, analyzing complexes into component features, drawing distinctions; on the other hand, of composing wholes and kinds out of parts and members and subclasses combining features into complexes, and making connections.³

We could cut off the letters of the printed poem one by one and could compose them again in a different book. Another imaginary method would be to refill the ink back to its bottles in some way and rewrite to the poem with the same ink. Accordingly, transporting information requires dismantling, packaging and reconstructing.

A similar case is the works for which a group of antique furniture is ground until they turn into powder and then this powder is plastered on the moulds of the same furniture. Here the process of dismantling is subject to an intense and intended intervention by the constructor of image. Since the material turns into powder, there is a move from mechanical to chemical, from dismantling to disintegration. We can dismantle and reconstruct the pieces of furniture repeatedly; however, once the furniture is in powder form, such reconstruction becomes impossible. The reason for this is the now-lost relationship between the whole entity and its parts, as well as the high complexity of the powdered furniture. The pulverised furniture is more like water, a cloud or a tree than a bicycle or a television set; it is impossible to put the pieces back together again and turn it to its original state. From the artifice to its natural state, and then back to the artificial... This is the reason for the furniture to be moulded beforehand: the mould freezes the previous form and gains the qualities of a carrier reflecting what resin stands for in the previous imagery of

³ Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*, Hackett Indianapolis 1988, p.7.

a river. The powder of furniture coated on the mould is like the lasting memory of the furniture. This memory is somewhat ‘parasitical’. Moreover, the form of an object that has lost its porosity is impaired, as we cannot speak of a familiar form or a composition without its pores. The powders and the small fragments hence appear as a pile. This is the justification of the transporting qualities of a mould. Otherwise, we would not be able to link them to the old furniture and would only see them as an ordinary pile of powder.

The many stuffs – matter, energy, waves, phenomena – that worlds are made of are made along with the worlds. But made from what? Not from nothing, after all but from other worlds.⁴

What are the similarities between carrying a poem and copying it? For example, it is possible to rewrite a handwritten poem on a different paper with a typewriter. What would be more interesting is to write a typewritten poem by hand in imitation of the typographic letters. A text that looks mechanical, yet in reality written with an organic hand...

Making a mould of a digital model and adding details to the mould by looking back at the digital model itself is quite similar to this process. What I mean by a digital model is the three-dimensional images on a computer-generated virtual space. Usually, (in 3D printers, CNC, etc.) geometry allows for a mapping of the digital world into the corporeal one. Hence, as it is in the case of a painter painting a landscape, we are not very much surprised by the printing of a digital model. What is surprising is the modification of the model to fit back into the digital environment. The graphite application of a bust whose impression is obtained through three-dimensional printing techniques in accordance with the digital patterns presents this peculiar feedback cycle. It is a ground-breaking relocation and translation; to an extent that it is not possible to pose the same questions that were related to the Ship of Theseus. To comprehend better, it is necessary to look closely at the technical processes. In the existing digital environment, the three-dimensional rendering is realised by reflecting specific patterns onto the model (we can think of this as a digital way of projection of a portrait photograph on a white plaster bust). These photographs, which might sometimes be completely generative outcomes, are usually obtained from real photographs (now imagine that we are projecting on to the bust with dozens of different projectors). Therefore the digital patterns consist of a manipulated collage of photographs taken from the physical world. When a new layer of graphite patterns is applied on the surface of the bust, the human hand refers

⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

back to the digital collage, as if imitating the typographic letters, and performs the virtual projection processes in an organic manner. As with the furniture, here as well a pile of powder is dressed on top of a geometric surface. The texture that is reflected in the virtual model is constructed with the anonymous photographs of people. When the traces of these shots are transferred to the physical world by the human hand and through multi-layered mapping, we encounter again a 'parasitic' memory.

Two suspended pigment blocks rubbing against each other point to the source of parasitisation and its positive consequences. As these blue and white blocks rub their colours, shapes blur, leaving remnants and dust in its immediate surroundings. To make these two realms interact, the act of transference must always contain a significant number of parasites. The buzzing sounds we hear over the phone or the heat that our body generates whilst holding an object in our hands are not unrelated. These rubbing blocks transmit some heat and visible powder, resulting in colour transference. These remnants and leftovers are present in all images.

Another distinct feature of these blocks is the way they function in real time. With these blocks, it is possible to directly observe the relations of reciprocal transference whereas only the results of the processes are visible in all other images. However, this transformation is a very slow one. At least a few days are needed to observe a substantial change in the colours and forms. Despite all the digital metaphors, here the changes in images only take place over long periods. There is an incredible languidness, in parallel to the ideas of artisanship, from the hardening time of the moulds to the way that the material surfaces are covered by any supply. On the one hand, this slowness is embedded in the nature of the material. As from dust to stars, everything has its own time, heat and potential for movement. On the other hand, an attitude that reverses the digital acceleration can be found. For example, a texture that can be visualised in a few seconds by a computer can be created slowly by a human hand or one brushstroke by Franz Klein can be recomposed in such a way as to include thousands of different hand movements by carving and cutting it slowly and its organic digitisation on high definition. One single brushstroke is watched in slow motion that lasts for days. Is not this the same in real life? When we raise our arm, millions of micro relocations, dislocations and transmissions take place in our body. The frame rate of our perception is so low that to recognise these, we believe in singularities and continuities. It would not be fair not to agree with Heraclitus on this subject.

All these images also have aspects that are rather unsettling. None of them hold their true function; most of the time, they are made out of hollow moulds and covered in particles. In spite of the tactility they stimulate, there is an intangibility to them. Due

to their covered surfaces, they remain closer to the ghostliness of visuals than to the tangible. Yet at the same time, they are not completely virtual. They carry indicative links, memories from where they come from and real materials. For instance, the imagery of *Untitled (Nebula)* reminds us of a cave in space. This resemblance is not merely visual. The materials used, particles of metal, are formed at the heart of stars. It is always possible in the memory of materials to find traces of the environments they gave rise to them; even when this construction site is a star. We feel uneasy because we cannot see these networks of relations directly but instead somehow feel them. In this sense, the anxiety felt is a positive one. Noise always holds the potential for giving birth to new situations or ideas.

The same feeling is experienced with intensity in relation to the marble blocks. A marble workshop is carried into a museum through the aforementioned processes of dislocation, translation and transferring, yet there are also ever so subtle subtractions and additions that preclude us from identifying them as copies, models or illusion. Once the geographical and cultural layers are added, this complexity increases. For example, there is the artisanship of imitating the marble look. The artist approaches this craft in the same way he does an object, and reconstructs its context in a layered network of relations. Even though the works are skilfully constructed, the fact that some of these skills are derived from existing craftsmen turns them into a conceptual product rather than merely the outcome of skills shaped around a technique. A performance artist who adeptly imitates a tree may not be performing photosynthesis but may become a tree in a semiotic sense. The use of crafts should be seen through this lens: as a way of operating that leaks into the culture and its geography, manifests itself through the creative process and isolates itself from the process throughout. The artist problematises his function as he does for the objects he creates with artisanal techniques. Finally, we can think of art not as an isolated area but within an anthropological context and alongside the geographical and cultural movements of the images as well as their producers. It is apparent in these works that the relocation and transformation of objects affect those who produce them; the notion of the artist has become subject to dislocation and flexibility. Intervention to objects makes us open to the intervention that may come from them. Some painters destroy their paintings and disappear in the process, while others are swallowed by their paintings and become part of them.

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