

Rabottini, Alessandro, "Dragging The Icon: Aaron Curry's Art And Sculpture In The Era Of Photoshop," *Aaron Curry: Bad Dimension*. Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2010, pp. 27-30

## **DRAGGING THE ICON: AARON CURRY'S ART AND SCULPTURE IN THE ERA OF PHOTOSHOP by ALESSANDRO RABOTTINI**

"We call 'Concrete Art' works of art which are created according to a technique and laws which are entirely appropriate to them, without taking external support from experiential nature or from its transformation, that is to say, without the intervention of a process of abstraction."  
Max Bill<sup>1</sup>

"Digital imagemaking precludes the necessity of having the world, or an actually existing subject, before the camera—let alone the need for a camera. The history of motion pictures is now the history of animation."  
Jim Hoberman<sup>2</sup>

Aaron Curry is an artist with excessive memory. Aaron Curry is an artist who shows no shame for the past. Both of these affirmations, in their hyperbolic and paradoxical form, may be considered valid when examined in light of the relationship with the citation and the appropriation that Curry makes clear in his own work.

What I will try to do in this essay is demonstrate how Curry's work defines a radically new form of citation and appropriation—both with regard to experiments in art in the last century and visual tropes in the current urban and mass-media landscape. His art surpasses the modernist model of the collage by reformulating the postmodern paradigm of the pastiche, to finally achieve a form of absorption and re-articulation of forms and motifs that, to be clear, we may associate with the image of digital morphing, a computer graphic and film technique that results in an image that gradually transforms into another image without any visible or identifiable breaks in the process.

At first sight, in fact, the works of Aaron Curry—particularly his distinctive sculptures made of interlocking wood and metal silhouettes—look like a surprising synthesis of well-known idioms. They seem almost like strange presences that are born out of an excess of memory and that, and perhaps precisely because of this, in the end immediately assume the appearance of ruins. The fact that these ruins appear to be archeological evidence from the future rather than the past further complicates the matter. More than one critic writing about Curry's work listed the visual experiences that converge therein: Isamu Noguchi's biomorphic abstraction and his constant osmosis between geology and the human body; Pablo Picasso's exuberance and the incredible energy with which the almost-out-of-control proliferation of his signs invests the world; Salvador Dalí's dissembled physiognomies and his soft, collapsed forms, from melted watches to floppy bodies that appear void of internal organs or skeletons. And then: the cubist refraction with its planes and viewpoints, and graffiti art, folk art and Alexander Calder, the DIY aesthetic and totemic art, sci-fi cinema, Henry Moore and the comic strip... to cite just a few sources that Aaron Curry blends into his work in a constant flow of shapes. Flux, in fact, seems to me to be the image that most aptly describes the dynamic with which the references used by the artist are placed in a reciprocal, dynamic and constant relation. Not only do his forms simultaneously refer to one thing "and also" to the other; they also appear to always be on the verge of being transformed into something else to further change their appearance.

Let's take, for example, his frequent use of the pencil mark left on the wood as if it were caught in the elaboration phase, as occurs in almost all the sculptures that make up the exhibition *Bad Dimension*. What may appear to be a mannerism—or rather the mimicry

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of the authenticity of what is handmade, an obvious executive nonchalance that seems to suggest impetus and creative impatience—is, in reality, a device that defines a state of incompleteness and transition, in particular an intermediate state between the projection of an image on a plane (in this case wood), the act of drawing a silhouette and the production of the three-dimensional form that ensues. While the drawing and line indicate a phase that precedes projection, the rapidity of the line and the sketch illustrate an intuitive and ideative moment that needs to be caught on paper, in a profoundly unstable moment.

Many of Aaron Curry's sculptures appear to be presented in their draft phase, in an unfinished, Michelangelesque carpentry version. But now, let us take a work such as *Ohnedaruth* from 2009 (p. 65), which once again generates a series of close associations. In fact, this dark volume appears to be the result of the interlocking of mechanical parts atop a human anatomy, which visually recalls the technological and muscular integration of *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, the bronze sculpture cast by Umberto Boccioni in 1913. But we could go even further because, like all Curry's sculptures, this one too deploys a dynamic articulation of planes and intersections, a kind of refraction and tremor of the silhouette that is always on the verge of opening, like the limbs of *Transformers*, those autobots that are the protagonists of the sci-fi film made in 2007 by Michael Bay, which were transposed from the famous toys that were all the rage in the 1980s. The movie's strength lies in the special effects produced by modern digital techniques that render the transformation from robot to automobile (and vice versa) very fluid and spectacular, a process that is automatically associated with a series of mechanical gestures embedded in the memories of viewers who played with *Transformers* as children.

While the ideal of super-performativity (of a mechanical nature)—an ideal that Futurism both incarnated and put an end to by preparing it to be used and consumed by the fascist cult for the military corps—has influenced the aesthetics of the super-hero in both cartoon strips and cinema, the digital nature of today's performativity in the case of the *Transformers* is instead such that the automobiles play the role of the hero and are also able to morph in a single, synthetic move from a common object (or human) into a super-identity. Aaron Curry appears to have introduced into his own work the same sinuous dynamism of digital morphing in the way he merges references that are distant from one another by making them appear to be interconnected stages of a single, perennial transformation process. Instead, the low resolution of raw materials, the handcrafted aspect of the pieces' montage and the incidental fragility of this dismountable totem as elementary construction actually constitute elements that openly contradict the aesthetic of power.

In his sculptures and single-edition serigraphs from 2008, made from designs produced on the computer, Aaron Curry seems to want to assemble a new figurative ideal—although I am not at all certain that we can talk about an ideal in his case—starting from the integration of different elements subject to a morphing process. But what are the poles of this constant oscillation and osmosis between forms? We have seen some of them: the modernist avant-garde and mass culture, abstraction and figuration, bidimensionality and tridimensionality, a visual sense that has something archaic and sacred, and pop's predisposition towards viewing all things as equals.

It almost seems as if the different objects that Curry would adopt within his practice of metamorphization represent a certain point in art history—particularly those forms of French Cubism and Surrealism that influenced the season of American figuration even before Jackson Pollock ushered in a tabula rasa—and a certain domination of pop culture, particularly with respect to the pretence demonstrated, from sci-fi cinema to the comic strip. The latter are forms of entertainment in which the body always exists through "substitution"—either with mechanical parts for the anatomy, or with masks

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and costumes for the human physiognomy—or as a kind of "alterity" with respect to terrestrial nature.

But wasn't it precisely the mask—a motif very often adopted by Curry in his works—that was behind the progressive production of alterity carried out in Cubist painting? And wasn't it precisely the idea of substituting the body with a plethora of its inorganic analogies—such as prostheses and mannequins—that was one of the central points in the production of ambiguity by Surrealism? It thus comes to mind that it is not by chance that Aaron Curry has decided to work within these specific areas of meaning, in a historic moment like ours in which the technologies of digital imagery make it possible to carry out an umpteenth substitution: that of reality itself in front of the video camera.

Jim Hoberman declared the advent of animation to be a radical revolution within the film industry, thereby supporting the elimination of a double necessity of having "the world, or an actually existing subject, before the camera." When he does so we are very far away from the politics of the simulacra of Jean-François Lyotard, which greatly nourished simulation painting and postmodern appropriative practices. Here we find ourselves faced with the production of complex images and narrations, able to unleash a spectacular nature that is unparalleled and explosive and to generate a combination of heretofore unknown illusions and open fiction. But if we pursue this reasoning should we then maintain that, just when tropes and images adapted to the ensign of the figure of morphing all merge together, Aaron Curry substitutes the need for the world—represented here by past styles—and the camera lens—whose equivalents are modernist collage and postmodern pastiche—by creating a new and dynamic imaginative entity?

In order to clarify this point, we may look back at his production from 2006 and observe how, until the beginning of 2008, his sculptures as well as his works on paper still presented a combinatory system related to the technique of collage. The images are often appropriated from magazines and books, combined with one another through obvious tears and summary cuts, as in *Shack #11* of 2006 (p. 140). The contours of the sculptures, mostly planes made of wood stained with spray paint in an approximate manner, are held together in a way that we might still define as "analog" because of his use of rope, for example, or images as the support, as in the case of *Fragments from a Collective Unity (Reclining)* from the same year (p. 133). Or, even in a work such as *When Forms Demarcating Things Are Opened Up and Merge into the Depiction of the Space Surrounding Them* of 2005 (p. 137) which, in its use of the image of Christina Aguilera as a base for the sculpture, can only seem to be a soft, late-adolescent and masturbatory fantasy (there is what appears to be a toilet) of Robert Rauschenberg's famous piece *Monogram* (1955-59).

The montage, in these cases, is an obvious form of matching and contraposition.

In his *Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art*, the art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh identifies in the concept of "allegory"—as defined by Walter Benjamin in his analyses of avant-garde art—the operation that lies at the basis of a long series of phenomena that, starting with the practice of cinematographic montage and the collage technique used in the different Dadaist, Cubist, Futurist and Constructivist ambits, passes through Nouveau Réalisme in France and Pop Art in America, until it matures between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 80s in the appropriationist art of the feminine matrix as practiced by Sherrie Levine and Barbara Kruger.

Buchloh defines acts of "appropriation" as:

"[The] depletion of the confiscated image, the superimposition or doubling of a visual text by a second text, and the shift away from purely perceptual attention to an act of reading, from the central substantive structure of the 'work' to the device of the frame."<sup>3</sup>

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I do not believe that this is the case with Curry and his use of collage and montage of different pieces. Here, we find ourselves faced with a kind of appropriation and pairing of images that is distant from the superposition of a secondary text over a primary text, with the result that the latter is linguistically and ideologically redefined. We are confronted with a practice in which bricolage is infiltrated with the fluctuation of images and information that are characteristic of Internet browsing and, even more so, the dragging of icons around the computer screen that is typical of using Apple computers. Aaron Curry seems to integrate the act of dragging, copying and pasting a file from one directory into an application like Photoshop, with the result that the images are sampled, explode on the screen, open and close and are modified at will.

But if we look at his more recent production since 2008, we may observe how some patterns created with the computer have gradually substituted other signs of a more gestural nature—see *Boy with Horns (with Mountains in his Pocket)* from 2009 (p. 60)—and how works on paper are mostly the result of an entirely digital elaboration. The figures themselves have gone from being the grotesque conflagrations between archaic and pop celebrity that they once were to appearing like mysterious presences, beings that shift from an animal to a human nature until they reach the state of android and vice versa.

Aaron Curry not only contracts and expands the historic aspect and the chronological positioning of things and shapes, but even appears to invert the direction in which it is moving: instead of achieving the definitive suppression of the object being represented, he brings it back, like an archaic totem, as if what we see were a ruin of something that has yet to happen.

It is probably not by chance that the most recent uses of digital animation in film production resulted in the catastrophism of 2012—a hyper-technological apocalypse, which nevertheless sinks its roots into the age-old Mayan prophecy—and, as Hoberman also observes, the retro-futuristic melancholy of *Wall-E*, the story of a solitary robot condemned to cleaning up the planet Earth for centuries after the planet has been depopulated by pollution.

If we ask ourselves a final question: whether Aaron Curry is a more or less “formal” artist, with all that this term implies, the answer may certainly be affirmative. But if we examine the world we live in, are we certain that we will be unable to, and yet forced to, define it as profoundly “formal” with all its touch screens, with its progressive supplanting of analog gears with digital devices, and with its surpassing of simulation as we knew it, in favor of a new spectacular creation that is neither reality nor illusion?

Must we thus conclude that Aaron Curry's formalism is a form of realism? Must we conclude that the excess of memory that his work seems to imply corresponds to an incredible archival and historical receptivity, almost as if it were some oversized hardware, and the software applied to this bulk of data were state-of-the-art software that grants extreme freedom in terms of morphing objects, be they from the past or present?

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1 Max Bill, *Concrete Art (1936–49)*, in Stiles, Kristine and Peter Selz (eds.), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: a Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1996, p. 74.

2 Jim Hoberman, *21st Century Cinema: Death and Resurrection in the Desert of the (New) Real* in "Artforum," December 2009, p. 213.

3 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art*, in Alberro, Alexander and Sabeth Buchmann (eds.), *Art after Conceptual Art*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2006, p. 31.