THE MOCKUP AESTHETIC: GESTURES OF TRANSGRESSION

I can't help but love the scanner aesthetic: tactile, immediate, loud, it's loaded with passion — up close, pressed onto a pane of glass, even the most minute details are caught by its sweeping light. It makes things feel real, less lonely.

Maybe these are bare images after all, unnaturally flattened and recorded in such a matter-of-fact way that they feel almost human. Maybe it's this mode of capture that removes their distance from the plane of the screen.

There's a similar feeling when I see paper mockups, textures which designers may use when they make posters, on Instagram. It's a very particular look: rippled, not completely smoothly pressed on the background, somehow too realistic for casual scrolling. Some of these mockups look like they'd been soaked in the rain, as if wet drapery, hugging to the silhouette of an undefined void.

Their visual similarities to wheatpaste position them as a unique design artifact, for their isolation within the bounds of the overwhelmingly squarish Instagram grid contradicts a main function of wheatpaste, which is rooted in political protest, producing multiple copies of the same message. And yet their status as mockups, marketed for a mass audience, pushes against the aura of individuality and specialness offered by their centrality in the 1080x1080 pixel Instagram post dimensions.

They may also arrive damaged, meticulously ripped and arranged, artificially weathered, distressed. Torn wheatpaste textures suggest a resilience and determination, a hardiness from surviving the passage of time. They are strangely, softly visceral, a beautiful and confounding illusion.

In the second chapter of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, the story is picked up by the wind and carried through different characters' consciousnesses, alternating between fragments of their waking moments and general, broad strokes documenting life events. The narrative voice floats around, at one point lingering on the remains of the house — the furniture, the dust, the absence of people:

> Loveliness and stillness clasped hands in the bedroom, and among the shrouded jugs and sheeted chairs even the prying of the wind, and the soft nose of the clammy sea airs, rubbing, snuffling, iterating, and reiterating their questions— "Will you fade? Will you perish?" —scarcely disturbed the peace, the indifference, the air of pure integrity, as if the question they asked scarcely needed that they should answer: we remain.

This integrity of domestic fixtures, the conviction with which they continue to exist, makes them their own witnesses to what Jane Bennett describes in *Vibrant Matter* as the "agentic contributions of nonhuman forces," a lasting presence that removes the narcissism of anthropocentrism and proposes a "congregational understanding of [distributive] agency." The sped-up aging process involved in the making of wheatpaste mockups disrupts the temporal basis in which things are taken as the actants they have always been; instead, the designer's hand, commanding through the touchpad, enacts supernatural gestures of wear and tear that codify this rugged texture as a symbol of the real and the authentic. Is the assertion of an object's power (or fundamental credibility) through the insistence on its ancient quality not similar to the myth of individual artistic genius? Does this assumption not perpetuate an outlook on creative production (or a design process) that only congratulates relentless competitiveness and unreflected self mythologizing?

The simulation of time via texture makes the latter a simulacrum in which definitions of authority and taste are reproduced and canonized — textures become signifiers, stripped of their

original context. Does it matter if the poster was intended to raise awareness of an issue, or rather serve as a form of advertising? The role of wheatpaste in guerrilla street art and politics, combined with the spirit of resistance, is in the paper mockup distilled into pure visual elements that engage in commodity fetishism, once again reflecting design's own complicity in the commercialization of protest, "softening the edges of capitalism." (Kevin Yuen Kit Lo)

The transformation of these signifiers of cultural solidarity, tangible and graspable "in real life," into sterile canvases, where the soft tints and shadows of natural light are removed, is ultimately tied to the presentation of design work on Instagram. Libby Marrs writes of Premium Generic as an aesthetic that "[fetishizes] and [elevates] the generic commodity form," "carefully [employing] realness-signifying language to signal a kind of effortless un-designed legitimacy." The tiled Instagram grid reinforces this impulse of infinite scalability and endless iteration all the more, its aerial perspective a subconscious reminder of the need for order and control. The central positioning of objects on design-Instagram is reflective of their role as "props" of rituals that uphold dominant cultural values, as Tim Edensor highlights in *Waste Matter*: the "common-sense obviousness," the "'proper' position of things in space" are intimately tied to the American tradition of conspicuous consumption. These relics of a distant past for which design is so nostalgic, an era immortalized for its subversion, is fossilized, made stagnant. Even the very way by which we encounter these design artifacts implies an innate desire for something *more*; how can we appreciate the embodied experience of street art when it is hermetically sealed and sold for parts?

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Tradition counts for nothing when it is no longer contested and modified.
A culture that is merely preserved is no culture at all.

— Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*

Nostalgia tantalizes us with its fundamental ambivalence; it is about the
repetition of the unrepeatable, materialization of the immaterial.
    The study of nostalgia inevitably slows us down. There is, after all,
something pleasantly outmoded about the very idea of longing.

— Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*

In a 1997 interview with the Media Education Foundation, bell hooks discusses American

culture's obsession with transgression:

> There's a way in which white culture is perceived as too Wonder Bread right now, not
> edgy enough, not dangerous enough. … When blackness is the sign of transgression that
> is most desired it allows whiteness to remain static, to remain conservative, and its
> conservative thrust to go unnoticed. … It really suggests the way in which fantasy will
> more and more mediate Fascism as it has always done in the past. Pretend that you're
> going somewhere that you're not really going, and you can stay in place and be ready to
> serve the state when the state calls you because you really haven't left home.

Two decades later it feels like we are still entangled in this eternal striving for higher resolution

textures to better render our low fidelity sentimentality, a kind of grunge, grit, grain, bleed that's

charmingly handsome and sincere. Boxed away in glossy digital cases, the debris of capitalist

excess — glass shards, stickers, scraps, scratches, plastic bags — awaits our close inspection.

Rescued waste is once again celebrated as the most relevant flavor of nostalgia at the moment;

but what else is there to mock up when all of the material past has been mined completely?

Maybe the imposed hierarchy of tasteful detritus — the idea that trash must look a certain way to

be beautiful or dignified, that it should be branded with a certain identity — is a symptom of a crisis in our field: we as young designers have become so alienated from the romantic vision of our practice championed by the living canon with which we have no connection other than seeing them talk at the latest Adobe festival. We dream of expression and collaboration but don't have access to studio equipment, some of us barred by the cost of a design education, which itself is mired in the politics of institutions. The digital ephemera that surrounds us online, designed for products already in a state of post consumption, further circulated by aggregator accounts, lead us to a confused soul/style searching journey, unsure of exactly what we're inspired by and what our standing is as we confront our inextricable reliance on industry software.

The fine tuning that goes into the making of a wheatpaste texture, then, perhaps is also a mode of transcendence and self empowerment, though severely localized and limited. Substituting the bodily gestures of tagging and mural painting for small, precise cursor movements in a seemingly neutral, controlled and depoliticized Adobe Photoshop interface, these gestures so needed to fake a reality are now vested with a divine gravitas. David Parisi's analysis of haptics/touch screen advertising throughout the 00's highlights how the especial focus on the index finger as the "[embodiment of] the essential totality of touch" has impacted larger societal outlooks on intimacy and connection, as well as the illusion of the interface as a safe space of refuge and comfort, benign and unbiased.

Scrolling through mockup stores on Instagram, there's a sense of discovery and excavation, as if remote urban exploration. Recalling Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle's understanding of the ruin as a site that "enables individual freedom, imagination and subjectivity," our engagement with these mockups may point to the potential for different ways

of experiencing materiality. Wondrous as they are in their graphic quality, these mockups are nonetheless not apolitical; as long as we can begin to ask these uncomfortable and awkward questions, probing into our devotion to an anachronistic aesthetic, we can better understand and parse their underlying ideologies and implications.

References, in order of appearance

Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*

Kevin Yuen Kit Lo, "Design and Capitalism." Via LOKI

Libby Marrs, Post-Authentic Sincerity

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        World."

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Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*.Via Internet Archive

bell hooks, interview with the Media Education Foundation. Via MEF

David Parisi, "The Cultural Construction of Technologized Touch."

Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle, *Ruins of Modernity*. Quoted text accessed via Bradley Garrett,
        "Undertaking recreational trespass: urban exploration and infiltration."