

‘Screen’: An Investigation of Mass Production through Repetition and Variation

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Abstract

This presentation will demonstrate the making process of my project which I call ‘Screen’ that was undertaken through studio practice research and the emotional responses that contribute to a body of finished work. It will then present ways in which these links can form the basis for researching ideas through the concept of repetition, mass production and variation. A survey of works by other artists is invaluable method for learning about myself and other, and how I am going to locate and lead my project in its context. The experiments are the personal landscapes of thoughts and ideas that can be viewed either chronologically or randomly, that form the basis for understanding and developing ideas. In this presentation I will show how I record my own thoughts, ideas and images; the use of the artistic context as a tool for reflection, and the writings and thoughts of others; the physical and emotional experiences that involve when I create art work; and also a record of the narrative journey of the work. The presentation will be delivered as a narrative of critical and creative process, and will make significant links between ideas, forms and contexts, and also the emotional response that result in the finished work.

Keywords: Mass production, Repetition, Variation.

Introduction

‘Screen’ is the second stage of my project investigating the aesthetic of consumer culture through an exploration of the used of visual images based on the principle of repetition and mass production. Basically, the idea for this stage was to create multi-layered images that produced multiple reflection and illusion through variations in tone and intensity by using light and dark contrast, and multi-coloured compositions. All the images in this stage were printed on plastic film. The overall aims of the work seek to reproduce the visual, aesthetic and psychological experiences of consumers as they interact with, and enjoy, the temptations and pleasures of the retail environment. Everyday we are dealing in choosing and buying things from thousands of varieties of products. Repetition and similarity, difference and variation are the characteristics of this mass culture; they provoke a response and act as a catalyst for communication. These aspects of advertising stimulate our visual experience, affecting our moods and emotions and creating the illusion of values and choices. Our daily experience is of being confronted by mass produced products which have both similarities and differences in appearance at the same time is very confusing. There are varieties of brands of similar products in different forms and prices. We move from one aisle to another and our eyes travel from one shelf to shelf and product to product trying to choose something from the great, variation and repeated mass of products.

Project Outline

Through the medium of screen printing this research project has examined how mass-produced images, in specifically constructed spaces, will interact, will stimulate perception, will communicate and will influence emotions. The imagery used was taken from consumer culture; no particular emphasis was placed on individual products. Visual elements was extracted and abstracted within the work. These visual elements was reproduced and repeated within specifically constructed spaces that reflect the habit, personality and life style of the consumer through its representation as follows: to construct visual aesthetic based on the principle of mass-production, repetition and variation utilising subjects from mass media and products of mass consumption; to create a metaphor of the repetitive and variation experience of mass culture environment through complex visual installations; to explore mass production principle by interplaying similarity and difference with the intention of understanding how these affect perception and bring about visual confusion.

The Context

Mass Production: copies and multiples

Allan McCollum is an artist who also uses repetition and mirrors processes of mass-production in the making of his art.

His works examine the relationship between art and everyday objects, and also the conventions of viewing art. Multiple versions and variations is a strategy he employs to probe the difference between an object and an icon, and the relationship between originals and copies. For the *Plaster Surrogates*, the combination is made possible by over 2000 copies of frames in twenty different sizes. As a whole, the installation produced a monochrome effect and the cast objects resembled blank pictures hung in clusters like an array of paintings in a gallery space. As McCollum said, 'To represent the way a painting "sits" in a system of objects...the goal was to make them function as props so that the gallery itself would become like a picture of a gallery by re-creating an art gallery as a stage set'.¹



Fig. 1 - Plaster Surrogates, 1982/84 (installation views)

From a distance, the works appear realistic but the cumulative repetition of almost identical pictures produces an ambiguous overall effect, seemingly endless series of objects in which is repeated one thing after another. Suzi Gablik stated, 'The "paintings" reveal themselves to be simulacra, pseudo artifacts in which picture, matte and frame are all one seamless object, molded in plaster, yet there is nothing to see'.² McCollum explained about the *Surrogates*, 'They're not paintings, only plaster objects which may, at a distance, resemble framed images. But every surrogate has been signed, dated and numbered, and no two are identical. We are in the presence of "original works"'.³ In this work, the artist is not really asking us to look at the individual objects, especially the blank spaces inside the frame, but to look at the entire space or environment as a representation of cultural artifacts.



Fig. 2 - Over 10,000 Individual Works, 1987-1988 (pink)

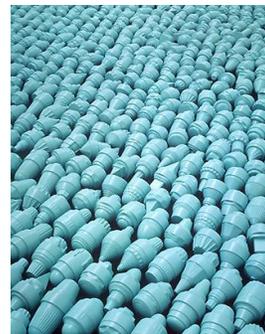


Fig. 3 - Over 10,000 Individual Works, 1987-1988 (blue)

His work titled *Over 10,000 Individual Works* is a further example of representing his concept of mass production; through the suggestion that: 'It must have taken a lot of people to do this'.⁴ In this work he strongly highlights the logic of mass production and repetition that have come to dominate our experience of the world. As McCollum said, '...this apparent antagonism between the work of fine art and the common everyday mass-produced object purchased by the common everyday person. If I can dramatize that antagonism it should reveal that these are just two aspects of the same thing'.⁵ *Individual Works* comprised of over ten thousand objects, all the same size, displayed on top of a long table. There were more than 150 shapes drawn from individual elements and the objects, made from combining a series of repeating top and bottom shapes allowed each object to be unique and individual.

¹ Buskirk, M., 'Context as Subject'. Retrieved 6th of march 2006 from <http://home.att.net/~amcnet3/marthabus Kirk.html>

² Gablik, S., 'The Reenchantment of Art'. Retrieved 1st of January 2006 from http://home.att.net/~allanmcnyc/Suzi_Gablik.html

³ Ibid.

⁴ Allan McCollum quoted by Saunders, W. (1993). 'Making Art Making Artists', *Art in America*, Vol. 81 No. 1, January 1993, p. 94.

⁵ Heartney, E. (1987). 'Simulationism', *ArtNews*, Volume 86 No. 1, January 1987, p. 134.

The objects are made from casts of common household items such as bottle caps, cat toys, paperweights, screw threads and electrical switches. The series of shapes produce a vocabulary of form that could be combined in hundreds of thousands of different ways. 'The phantasm as it is defined by Plato...the copy of a copy. With the exception that there is no longer any model, and hence no copy',⁶ writes Jacques Derrida. In this work the relationship and tension between the mass and the individual is strong. Each object is unique, looks like an industrially manufactured product and placed together they appear the same. Helen Molesworth wrote, 'Their pleasure lies in the compare and contrast, in the proliferation of objects, as opposed to any singular one'.⁷ *Individual Works* refer to our experience in everyday life, of trying to maintain our individual identities in a world dominated by mass- production, and the constant demand to choose something out of the great repeated mass of products.

Through the use of silkscreen, Andy Warhol sought to make art of mass produced items and to mass-produce the art itself. As Warhol described what art is in the following way: 'Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art....Making money is art, and working is art and good business is the best art'.⁸ Mass production became the most dominant aspect in Warhol's art, a concept extended to his studio, which he called The Factory. He embraces the methodology 'like factories, with many hands producing work that would appear under a single signature'.⁹ In 1963, Warhol made a startling statement, 'Paintings are too hard. The things I want to show are mechanical. Machines have less problems. I'd like to be a machine, wouldn't you?'¹⁰

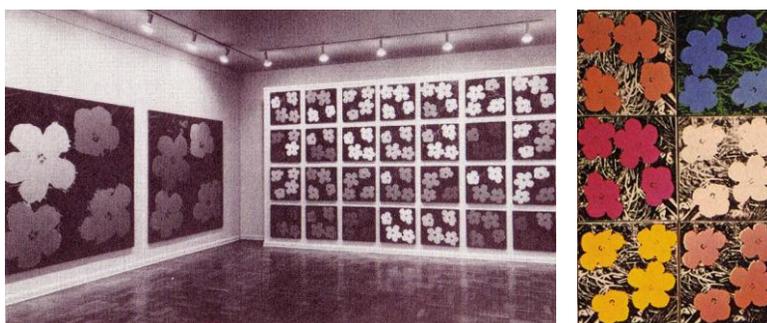


Fig. 4 - Flowers, 1964 (installation view and detail)

Sameness, ordinariness, anonymity and stereotype are the characteristics of mass culture that Warhol forces us to confront. These ideas are encapsulated in a formal grid layout, as seen in his works *Flowers* and *Cow Wallpaper*. In the former he enlarges the flower images to oversize and repeatedly prints them in different colours, so they look like wallpaper. Thomas Hess reported, 'It is as if Warhol got hung up on the cliché that attacks "modern art" for being like "wallpaper" and decided that wallpaper was a pretty good idea'.¹¹ All images are printed in square form and arranged in different parallel compositions. Along with his work with the images, Warhol has produced hundreds series of *Flowers* in different sizes and colour combinations. The use of screen printing techniques allowed him to readily copy and create multiple images, in which 'the abolition of the hierarchy of subjects worthwhile representing'¹² occurs. Warhol's statement: 'I think everybody should be a machine'¹³ aptly reflects his methods of reproduction and he suggested that 'a painting is a form of commercial display. Something is selling itself: something is on sale'.¹⁴

⁶ Quoted by Ball, E. (1989). 'The Beautiful Language of My Century – from the situationists to the simulationists', *Arts Magazine*, Volume 63 No. 5, January 1989, p. 71.

⁷ Molesworth, H., 'Impossible Object: Man-made Fulgurites by Allan McCollum'. Retrieved 3rd of February 2006 from <http://home.att.net/~allanmccyc/molesworth.html>

⁸ McCarthy, D. (2000). *Pop Art*, London: Tate Gallery Publishing, p. 26.

⁹ Mercurio, G. & Morera, D. (2004). *The Andy Warhol Show*, Ginevra-Milano: Skira, p. 57.

¹⁰ Stuckey, C. F. (1989). 'Warhol in Context', *The Work of Andy Warhol*, Seattle: Bay Press, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹² Buchloh quoted by Mattick, P. (2003). *Art In Its Time: Theories and practices of modern aesthetics*, London: Routledge, p. 151.

¹³ Alloway, L. (1974). *American Pop Art*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., p. 113.

¹⁴ Yau, J. (1989). *Repetition*, Exhibition Catalogue, New York: Hirschl & Adler Modern, p. 6.

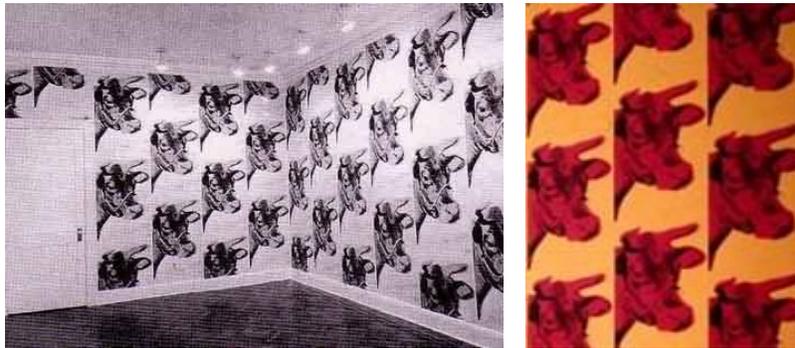


Fig. 5 - Cow Wallpaper, 1966 (installation view and detail)

The wallpaper concept is continued in *Cow Wallpaper* in which the realistic photo-based image of a cow's head, printed in artificial colour, pink on a yellow background. The wall of the gallery covered by hundreds of cow head images that arranged in grid formation. As Ivan Karp reported:

In 1965, Warhol said that he was using up images so fast that he was feeling exhausted of imagination... He asked, "What shall I paint? What's the subject?" I couldn't think of anything. I said, "The only thing that no one deals with now these days is pastorals." I said, "My favorite subject is cows." He said, "Cow!" He said, "Of course! Cows!" He said, "New cows! Fresh cows!"¹⁵

The intensity of the colours is compelling; though, their combination, in reality, is totally unsuitable for wallpaper design, '... thus generating a complex interaction between the handmade and the mechanical, elite and mass media, art and politics, form and content'.¹⁶ The space is overwhelmed by the warm colour reflection and multiple bright coloured mass produced images are repeated over entire walls. This is what Buchloch called, 'the "affirmative" or "critical" character of their subject's response to mass culture'.¹⁷

The Studio Investigation

Andy Warhol said he wanted to be a machine, and I totally agreed with him. Even though I had experience working with repetition and mass production before, the nature of this research project brought me one step further. I really have to turn myself into a machine, to think like a machine and to work like a machine. I set the time frame which would roughly be for every project it would takes about 2-4 months to complete and that means I have to work about 10-12 hours a day, 7 days a week. In this particular context, in one day I have to finish a certain preparation processes and print in order to complete the project within the time allocated. It is really tiring and needs a lot of patience and concentration.

When calculating of every single printings process (preparing and arranging the images, printing and combining the printed panel), I would know the amount of time this would take to complete every project. Repeating the same process day after day for weeks and months really challenged me emotionally and psychologically, which I felt like was doing something endless. Every morning, when I came to the studio and kept on thinking when will I finish the project, even though I had already set the time frame for it. There was this strange feeling while performing this task. It was a new experience to me, something that is quite difficult to explain. As the projects involve the method of mass production, time and labour are not my only concerns. I also have to find materials that are economical that can be used to produce work in large quantities without losing the quality texture or characteristic that I wanted. I have to carefully estimate the amount of material that I require, even to the extent, how many of prints can be produced from one bottle of ink.

Stocktake Sale 2005

Acrylic screen printing on plastic film, stainless steel wire, turnbuckles, swages, eye screws, fold back clips, coloured plastic, pine, fluorescent lights, sticky tape
360x360x270 cm

¹⁵ Quoted by Stuckey, C. F. (1989). 'Warhol In Context', *The Work of Andy Warhol*, Seattle: Bay Press, p. 19.

¹⁶ Mattick, P. (2003). *Art In Its Time: Theories and practices of modern aesthetics*, London: Routledge, p. 144.

¹⁷ Quoted by Mattick, P. (2003), p. 140.

Our consumer spaces are filled with an extensive range of advertising campaigns that play a significant role in stimulating our senses. There are so many promotions telling us that everything is for sale and everything is the best price but, which one is really has the bargain price is the most critical and confuse element of our experience in retail spaces. However this is the aesthetic of the market place that manipulates our desire and needs through variations of choices. These phenomena gave me an idea to create some sorts of confusing experience representation through multi-layered images on translucent material.

The images used for this work are the products that can be found in any supermarket, department store or retail shop and basically the items are ones that we deal with almost everyday: toothbrush, cutlery, shoes, cookware set, ice cream, hand bags, food and drink, shopping bag, etc. I have collected hundreds of images from sale catalogues such as Woolworths, Coles, Harris Scarfe, Target, Myer, Kmart, etc. and make several alterations through cropping, extraction and abstraction using a photocopy machine as well as manual touch-ups. To visualize the idea, I started experimenting with the variation of black/white, orange and green. The next stage was to explore the effect in coloured images which I experimented with multi-coloured layers by combining white, orange and green images.



Fig. 6 - Example of extracted images



Fig. 7 - Composition of variation sale promotions, discount percentage figures and bar codes (detail)



Fig. 8 - 'experiments'

The work comprised over 3500 images in a variety of sizes and all were printed on plastic film separated into five different layers. These were: 3.5x3.5in, 4.5x4.5in, 8x8in, 14x14in. It was made up of a composition of various sale and discount percentage figures, and bar codes. This composition contains repetitive bar codes and words in a variety of font types and sizes such as 'sale', 'clearance', 'discount', 'reduced', etc, and sale figures such as 10%, 20%, 25%, 50%, 70%, 75%, etc. that are normally used in advertising campaigns. This composition was placed on the third layer which was in the centre. The biggest images were placed on the first layer and followed by the smallest and gradually much bigger images on the fourth and fifth layers. Only a first layer applied different panel configurations, while the rest used the same structure of combination (refer to fig. 9).

The three different tones were placed alternately with the darkest on the first layer, middle tone on the second and fourth, and the lightest tone was put on a third and a fifth layers. And the background was entirely covered by bright orange coloured plastic.

Layer 1												Layer 2, 3, 4 &5			
All Side (wall)												All Side (wall)			
1	4	7	3	6	2	8	5	2	6	3	7	1	2	1	2
2	5	1	4	7	3	7	4	1	5	2	6	2	1	2	1
3	6	2	5	1	4	6	3	7	4	1	5	1	2	1	2

Fig. 9 - The chart for panel compositions/combinations (example)



Fig. 10 - Stocktake Sale, 2005 (installation view and detail)

In this work I experimented with orange coloured fluorescent lights placed along the top and bottom of the wall. The surroundings glowed with the reflection of the orange light bouncing off wall, floor and ceiling. Because it is a very strong colour physically, it promotes a feeling of surprise and excitement when the viewer enters the space. The orange, while creating a cohesive environment, can equally create a sense of aggression through its intensity. This feeling was strengthened by the narrowness of the space and density of the repetitive imagery, especially the biggest images on the front layers which the audiences have to confront close-up.

Through the arrangement of layers hung at various distances, the work offered a variety of complex viewing experiences where the composition of the images changed and varied depending on one’s angle or position. However, the use of monochromatic orange creates a monotonous environment where the audience could feel, psychologically, the impression of sameness and infinity. In other words, the audience is surrounded by the repetition of mass produced images that evoke the paradoxical connection between similarity and variations among multiple identical images. Through its repetitive mode, this work forms a complex visual vocabulary that creates a sense of continuity and infinity while the audience finds it almost impossible to determine which images are similar and which are different. The variations of imagery become infused through a monotonous field of infinite sameness. Just as in the supermarket, the consumers are not really aware of the small marginal differences among the products. This is the reality of the products in the market place which have been produced in varieties of type and range that give a consumer the various kinds of choices.

Big Brand Savings 2006

Acrylic screen printing on plastic film and paper, pine, mdf, acrylic paint_840x360x270 cm

Every week I receive the sale catalogues from Woolworths and Coles, and they have made me think about how to use these original images to represent our shopping experience through actual advertising images. There are thousands of different products in variations of range and with only small marginal differences in price. We normally do not concern ourselves about the small differences in every product and usually we choose the product depending on the impression suggested by the package; that is, the appearance of design and colour combinations. This variation of packaging in repetitive and different forms, sizes, designs and colours creates an overall harmonious environment that generates a unique visual pleasure. This work has been another piece that uses images directly from sale catalogues complete with detailed information of the products (brands, type of product and range, weight such as Nutella Hazelnut Spread 400g,

Doritos Tapas or Dippas Range 175g, Salsa 300g or Twisties 190g, SPC Canned Fruit 825g, Tom Piper Canned Meals 400g, Paul Newman’s Own Dressings 250g, etc.) and prices, including the amount of saving for every product compared to original prices. For example: 3.49 save 50¢; 1.98 save 1.56; 1.99 save 1.15; 1.97 save 72¢; 2.98 save 71¢. The images were extracted from weekly Woolworths sale catalogues and there were over 80 types of products that were repeated in two sizes. The idea was to present the work in the form of one narrow long corridor that used the combination of multi-coloured images and cast shadows to represent our experiences of the overwhelming world of advertising. However in this work, the images were placed on the floor and ceiling, because I wanted the viewers to look up and down rather than to look at right and left.



Fig. 11 - Extracted images from sale catalogue



Fig. 12 - Experiment detail

Composition A				Composition B				Composition C			
Small images		Big images		Small images		Big images		Small images		Big images	
Red	Green	Orange	Yellow	Blue	Green	Violet	Red	Yellow	Orange	Violet	Blue
Composition D				Composition E				Composition F			
Orange	Violet	Green	Red	Blue	Orange	Green	Yellow	Red	Violet	Orange	Blue

Fig. 13 - The chart for image and colour compositions/combinations (example)

The work comprised 1200 images that incorporated 24 panels (twelve on the floor and twelve on the ceiling) in which every panel was the combination of two layers of plastic panels that contained four colour combinations in two different sizes of images (outside layer incorporated the small images and the inside layer included the big images). Every colour uses the same images but they are repeated in different combinations with other colours and images (refer to fig. 13).



Fig. 14 - Big Brand Savings, 2006 (installation view and detail)

I wanted the work to create a complex visual reflection and representation that transformed the space into a paradise of colours that were pleasing to the eye. Using projected lights over the top of the images on the ceiling, the bright repetitive multiple colour suffused the surroundings as well as creating a cast shadow on the wall. The unique characters between multi-coloured images on the floor and ceiling with the cast shadows on the wall created a strong contrast, fragmenting the viewer’s perception as well as producing rhythmic optical vibration. At the same time, the typical quality of the shadow also formed an illusionistic representation to the actual images that created the impression of positive and negative spaces. The space was visually inviting. Reflections of the extensive mass produced multi-coloured images and cast shadows encouraged an impression of a dynamic harmonious surrounding which lent another powerful dimension to the viewing experience. As the audience walked through the space, their eyes and minds could almost be completely absorbed in the glowing repetitive colour combination. The translucent quality of the plastic generated the visual illusion of overlapping images as well as brightening the colour - particularly the images on the ceiling.

As the light penetrated into the plastic, it transformed the repetitive coloured images into brilliant blazing reflections. As Brigita Ozilins has noted about the work, ‘Reflections of mass-produced goods are cast over floor and walls and our bodies - we become mesmerized, engulfed in the bright colours of the brash commercial world’.¹⁸ *Big Brand Savings* created a strong association with consumer spaces and our experience of them. The repetition of mass-produced images in various combinations could create the feeling of disorientation. At the same time, the work may also invite the viewer to search for order within the riot of images. The visual information is very confusing, especially the products and the prices. For the viewers it is almost impossible to determine all the aspect of sameness and variations of mass produced images between each panel. This is actually the situation that we experience at the moment we enter any supermarket because we are not really sure what we want or what to buy. Products are made in widely different ranges, and have different brands and variations in prices with only small marginal differences. We as consumers try to find the best for less or, in other words, the best value for money. We may looking and comparing - especially the products and prices of different brands - until we find something that satisfies our desire. This is the complex experience that we usually encounter which has been created by the elements of repetition and the variations that dominated our market place.

Conclusion

The project has investigated strategies for representation of consumer culture in an installation format. It has employed an aesthetic and an art practice that can reveal how mass production, repetition and variation affect our decision making as consumer. Infinite variation of shape, form, image and size reflect the reality of repeated mass products in everyday life. The work represents our experience in common life where our perception is confused by the similarity of repetitive object caused by mass industrial production. It also represent on how the mass produced images interact, stimulate perception, communicate and influence our emotions. The idea was to bring our attention and recall our memory to daily life environment which demand desire and interaction that express our individuality.

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¹⁸ Ozolins, B., ‘Transfer, copy, print, transport’, *Transport*, Exhibition Catalogue, Hobart: Salamanca Arts Centre, 2006, p. 6.