

## DISAPPEARING ACTS : PRESENCE AND ERASURE

Dr Jean Wainwright

‘The relationship between what we see and what we know is never settled’ (John Berger, 1972)

When John Berger suggested in 1972 that we are continually looking at the relationship between things and ourselves, he could have been referring to one of the dynamics behind rAndom’s practice.<sup>1</sup> Like an adult playing peek-a-boo with a child, their interactive sculptural artworks seduce and delight the viewer. Their innovative and clever re-appropriation of everyday objects and events, applying cutting edge technology to give them new artistic meaning, resonates with an artistic trajectory that spans the twentieth century to the present day.

Historically, new technologies have excited avant-garde artists, who sought to produce unexpected juxtapositions, resulting in ground-breaking artworks or new ways of seeing. The last fifty years have seen an increasing engagement with temporality: from Pop Art, Fluxus and Happenings to Performance Art, the deployment of ephemeral materials, time-based actions and the presence of the viewer to complete the work of art, have all been integral features.<sup>2</sup> Cezanne in 1902, attempting to capture the momentary changes of light on Mont Sainte-Victoire;<sup>3</sup> Richard Hamilton in 1957, suggesting that Pop Art should be ‘popular and transient’; Andy Warhol in 1963, stating that art should become more ‘machine-like’ and Laurie Anderson in 1998, positing that ‘Technology is a campfire around which we gather’, all leave their trace on rAndom’s practice.

Ingeniously conceived and designed, rAndom’s art engages with our fundamental behaviour patterns to produce a two-way dynamic interaction between artwork and participant. Uniquely of its time, responding both to technological advances and our familiarity with machines such as scanners, printers, photocopiers and computers, rAndom’s art pieces challenge the traditional basis of art history: the permanence of mark-making and the fixing of an image on canvas or ground. Constantly changing, continually being refreshed and renewed, this is the art of the future. However, rAndom emphasise that they are ‘not inventors’, their method being rather to ‘...re-appropriate things that have existed or do exist, whether they are quite recent or quite old’.

A decade ago, author and curator Michael Rush observed that ‘...while new technology itself involves a plenitude of machines, wires and dense mathematical and physical components, the art that has been born from the art-and-technology marriage is perhaps the most ephemeral art of all, the art of time’. Yet despite the often transitory nature of their mechanically reproduced images, rAndom’s art does have presence; the machines and components have a solid and material existence in time and space.

Stuart Wood, Florian Ortkrass and Hannes Koch’s art and design background was strongly biased towards the Bauhaus tradition, and its underlying fusion of innovative product and architectural design with aesthetic solutions can be seen to underpin their experimental thinking. How we handle tools, see our faces in mirrors, navigate our bodies through space, and behave socially are all fundamental to rAndom’s innovative resolutions: Pixel Roller (2005), Light Roller (2005), Temporary Graffiti (2008), Study For A Mirror (2009), Self Portrait (2010) and Temporary Printing Machine (2011) all have their origins in rAndom’s curiosity about what objects do, how things work, how to re-appropriate the familiar and how to insert the magical into our digitally saturated world using radical, scientific, yet seemingly simple solutions.

Fundamental to their aesthetic are debates on the transience of images and of us as human beings. The appearance or disappearance of images, faces or groups of people happens in front of the viewer, who is intrinsically linked to the work they are both experiencing and creating.

Already in 1958, the Pop Art critic Lawrence Alloway was suggesting that our definition of culture was changing ‘as a result of pressure of the great audience which is no longer new, but is experienced in the consumption of its arts... Our definition of culture

is being stretched beyond the fine art limits imposed on it by Renaissance theory and refers now, increasingly, to the whole complex of human activities’. Temporary Graffiti would seem in particular to conform to this analysis. The spray paint can favoured by the graffiti artist is filled not with paint but with light. In the dark, the beam emitted from the can (which ironically people often shake before they begin working with it) can be used to draw in a variety of ways, with a number of people working at the same time, on a light sensitive background.

The transitory implications of the work, the erasing of the drawings as the traces fade to dark, and the vitality of different participants is reminiscent of the energy described by Robert Storr in 2010, commenting on Jean-Michel Basquiat’s graffiti painting: ‘The manic scribbling of his paintings sends charges into the atmosphere... Basquiat’s “body electric” is, correspondingly, both the source and the receptor of his art’s energy, and the energy of adjacent bodies inside and outside his pictures’. When Basquiat collaborated with Andy Warhol, he would often paint over areas that the two artists had worked on together, erasing Warhol’s mark.<sup>4</sup> In Temporary Graffiti nothing remains but the can, the art lives in the moment.

As in many of rAndom’s pieces it was a previous work, Light Roller (2005), that led to Temporary Graffiti. Acting like a hand held printer the image is already stored in the computer, which is revealed as the light roller moves over the photosensitive paper. It would seem that every technology carries within it the DNA of the preceding one. The computer programming that results in art works such as Temporary Printing Machine or Self Portrait references Polaroids, photocopiers, video and early computer arts, though now with a novel contemporary twist.

In Temporary Printing Machine, the act of standing in front of the ‘canvas’ produces a portrait, which slowly emerges and then dissolves. The desire to see ourselves is a fundamental human emotion; the act of sitting for a portrait, a mainstay of traditional art. Here, however, the presence of the sitter does not result in a fixed and permanent record of the past moment, but rather an image which emphasises life’s fragility and transience. The uniting of subject and object in an image which gradually fades to white, evokes the screen prints of Andy Warhol, particularly his repeated images. Also, a marriage of temporal and mechanical, though producing permanent works of art, these often had fading and erasure of the image, which was the result of the printing-ink running out, a deliberate device. The purple colour of rAndom’s Self Portrait is evocative of Warhol, as it was one that he favoured for his later screen prints.

In Temporary Printing Machine and Self Portrait the visual link to Polaroid film, with the image’s gradual appearance on light sensitive paper, is reversed. In Self Portrait one can also find links with Richard Hamilton’s Four Self-Portraits 05.3.81 (1990), which derived from Polaroids he had taken in the 1980s, obscured with acrylic colour, then ten years later scanned into a computer and made into enlarged prints. Temporary Printing Machine has conceptual links to works such as Peter Campus’ dor (1975), where a wall-mounted camera took a closed circuit image that was visible to the visitor as they entered or left the room. The image was temporary, existing only as long as the visitor was present; nothing was saved or stored. Campus remarked in 1974 that ‘in a closed-circuit video situation one is no longer dealing with images of a temporarily finite nature. The duration of the image becomes a property of the room’.

Not all of rAndom’s work is about the transitory, however. Pixel Tape has a different relationship with erasure. Rolls of tape are printed with different digital dot matrix patterns, which can be used to create numbers or letters by erasing the digital graphics. The hand-rendered work, produced from the formulaic digitised tape, gives an illusion of creativity and control even though the shape is already pre-configured. The results are permanent until the tape itself is peeled off the surface it is fixed to, ultimately destroying it. We are now in Jenny Holzer territory with her electronic billboards and dot matrix installations. Pixel Roller again explores the concept of mechanical reproduction, where rapidly applied graphics can be generated from the internet or any number of digital sources. This would perhaps have gone some way towards fulfilling Warhol’s 1975 quip in response to reading that on his death Picasso had left four thousand masterpieces: ‘You see the way I [Warhol] do them, with my technique, I really thought I could do four thousand in a day.

And they'd all be masterpieces as they would all be the same painting...But it took more than a day, I think it took a month'.<sup>5</sup>

Using twenty-first century technology, rAndom can make hundreds of artworks a day. Though the works are created through repetitive action by a machine they are not, however, the same; each one is unique, a moment in time. The artist-creators provide the means to create the works, but not the works themselves: they have no control over who the subject or co-creator will be and exactly how the artwork will look. When the image fades, the memory lives on...and the technology remains to create another day.

Art reflects our society. It is as Berger states about our 'narcissistic relationships with ourselves in our impermanent state of being'. Stuart Wood mentions that the desire of rAndom was not to be performance artists (as they felt they were becoming in Pixel Roller, which he describes as very 'Maywa Denki'), but always to produce an object that 'you could give to someone else and hand over'.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the last words should be left to Francis Bacon who in conversation with critic David Sylvester in 1963, suggested that art had now become a game by which 'man distracts himself', artists needed to 'deepen their game to be any good at all, so that [they] can make life more exciting'. rAndom have fulfilled that prediction.

<sup>1</sup> In Chapter 1 of his book *Ways of Seeing*, published in 1972, John Berger discusses how we establish our place in the world by how we see things. He wrote it in response to an earlier essay by Walter Benjamin entitled *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, from Benjamin's book *Illuminations*, which was first translated into English in 1969.

<sup>2</sup> Fluxus was a loose-knit international movement of artists, composers and designers that emerged in the 1960s and was active until the mid-1970s; Performance Art emerged as a movement in the 1970s, following on from Pop Art, Happenings and Fluxus interventions. In the last ten years it has experienced a revival as a dynamic movement, with the Museum of Modern Art in New York collecting live Performance works and the opening of the Tate Tanks in London in 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) began sketching Mt Sainte-Victoire in Aix en Provence, France in 1897. He made over sixty paintings and sketches of the mountain.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988) was a New York graffiti artist who began by spray-painting around lower Manhattan. His work was publicly exhibited in the Times Square Show in 1980 and was enthusiastically received by the art world. He was introduced to Andy Warhol's Factory in 1982 and in 1984 he and Warhol started working together.

<sup>5</sup> Andy Warhol makes this comment in his book *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, in the chapter *Atmosphere*.

<sup>6</sup> In conversation with Jean Wainwright in the rAndom Studio, July 2012.

### Study Of Time / I, 2011

Evolved from the scenography for Wayne McGregor | Random Dance's production FAR, the installation takes light and shade as a medium for the representation of time. An illuminated, autonomous algorithm explores varying conceptions of time, how it is perceived and humankind's relation to its continual record. At intervals, the shadows it casts enigmatically reveal the time of day.

*Corian, copper, LEDs, custom software, computer*

1512 x 612 x 152 mm

Edition of 8 + 4 AP

