Living Room Politics

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Abstract

I am investigating the relationship between place and the reception of visual content, focusing on the political or ideological transformations that may result from internalizing art objects in the home space.

I chose people from a variety of cities, ages, professions and histories, and asked them questions carefully designed to reveal relationships between their political stances and how they display themselves (and their interests) in their homes. Though they are diverse, my subjects are friends and acquaintances, and most have lived in Mexico or the United States at some point in their lives.

I aim to find examples of "domestic inculcation," based on the premise that belief systems influence how people behave politically, and the possibility that the visual contents of a home space reinforce belief systems. Like icons in a temple, objects and artworks in the home can become activated through prolonged exposure and familial context, instilling views that are either propagated or rejected. If a home space can be the setting for inculcation, what is the role of the space and the objects themselves?

As a result of this investigation I will develop a sculptural installation, arranging activated objects on mantelpieces to embody specific ideologies. Ideology is defined by *The Free Dictionary* as "the body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of an individual", or "a set of doctrines or beliefs that form the basis of a political, economic or

other system."

Mysticism and Politics

Throughout history, visuals have been known to seduce people. The particularities of content and display can trigger emotional responses that affect how people behave socially. With regards to the relationship between religious exhibits and social impact, Neysela da Silva (2010) states "a social objective ... runs wider than just the exhibit itself, particularly bearing in mind that the relationship between religion and group identity means that religion and its symbols provide a focus for allegiance to social and ethnic groups" (p.170). Da Silva's article for *Material Religion* implies firstly that a crossover exists between the visual content that we associate with socio-politics and that of religion, and secondly that these images or icons form a treasured part of a collective cultural identity.

Throughout history, communities have used icons and images as signifiers for collective identity or affiliation. Consequently, these images can elicit passionate social responses. Carol Strickland and John Boswell (1992) address the seductive nature of iconic images throughout the Byzantine era, when adoration of icons by Christian communities was particularly extreme, "Ardent believers carried them into battle or wore away their faces by kissing them. So powerful did the cult of icons become that they were banned (for over a century) as a violation of the commandment against idolatry" (p.24). Through icons, divine forms were embodied in the form of small paintings, making religious characters accessible in a visual and tactile way. These icons had two

important properties that are paralleled in visual content today: Familiar visual content can reinforce belief systems through persistent exposure, and can reinforce archetypes, or roles that humans naturally latch on to.

In *Myths to Live By,* Joseph Campbell (1972) outlines the properties of a visual that can become elevated, or activated, to the role of a "living mythological symbol". Such a visual "turns you on in a certain direction, making you function in a certain way- which will be one conducive to your participation in the life and purposes of a functioning social group." The visual functions as a social directive, but can become deeply enmeshed in the identity of an individual as well, "when the symbols provided by the social group no longer work... the individual cracks away, becomes dissociated and disoriented, and we are confronted with what can only be named a pathology of the symbol" (p. 88). A symbol that belongs to a belief system also holds meaning for all the individuals involved.

It is possible to discern which symbols a large community values and protects because these symbols are prolific, and function as as markers of a community's expectations as well as their shared beliefs about existence. The belief systems of a large community are paralleled at a smaller scale, in people's homes, which contain more nuanced visual markers of expectation and belief.

Though the home can become seemingly banal with familiarity, inevitable associations are formed within that space. The formation of these associations is similar to the process of inculcation at a church, if it is visited regularly. From personal experience, growing up going to church every Sunday can be associated with faith,

guilt, shame and expectation. When an icon from church suddenly reappears outside the church, all of these associations resurface. The home can also be the setting for associations of guilt, shame and expectation. Regardless of the type of association, the home is the setting for the reinforcement of a familial belief system, and when its visual contents are re-encountered, they can reproduce many of the same symptoms.

Belief systems constrain how people behave politically. This is especially evident in United States in the strong support many Christians show for various conservative platforms of the Republican Party. For example, a person who believes life begins at the moment of conception may identify with conservative legislation that aims to make abortion illegal.

In the article "Right Minds" for *The American Conservative,* Samuel Goldman (2011) defines classic conservatism as "a coherent theory of opposition to the French Revolution and its consequences.. insist(ing) on hierarchy in human affairs, both public and private.", convinced of the immutable fact that "human beings are born into networks of sympathy, obligation, and authority … (that) make us what we are." This definition implies that conservatives resist change because they tend to believe in a "calculated universal pattern" in which a natural hierarchy occurs, rendering any struggle for change hurtful or futile. The relationship between opposing abortion and believing in a predestined universal pattern indicates a connection between belief system and political stance.

What is the role of visual content in reinforcing conservative belief systems in the

home? A few subjects of my investigation who identify themselves as conservative, or partially conservative, described the visual contents of their home space: Subject 17's mantelpiece contains "a small sculpture of Archangel Michael, under a huge portrait of my Grandmother.", Subject 2 simply has "A television.", and Subject 18 displays "stock decor, a religious item, and a painting."

In another context, the description of these objects would suggest a tendency towards pragmatic embellishment. Because I asked each subject to identify his or her belief system, the visual content became "activated" and acquired new importance.

When I decided to send thirty subjects a questionnaire that might point to connections between the imagery they surround themselves with and their political or ideological stance, I realized that the compelling connections I was making between object and impact (political or ideological) depend entirely on context.

Subject 4 presented a strong correlation between extreme liberalism and a deliberately unconventional arrangement of objects on display. The subject described her/himself as "extremely liberal, radical. I believe that the best course of action for improving the future is the dismantling of what has been taken as normal or correct in the past." Subject 4's curatorial decisions reinforce this view, "I put special objects in places where I will run into them often or at times when I'm not thinking about it. One thing that I look at everyday is a piece of newsprint that has writing on it framed on my wall. The writing is a riddle about the meaning of life." The arrangement of objects Subject 4 describes seems purposefully opposed to conservative thought, or the

tendency to reinforce patterns and hierarchies, in favor of mystery and surprise.

Conducting an investigation required that I take on the role of an amateur ethnographer/artist. In *The Ethnographic Move in Contemporary Art - What Does it Mean for Art Education*, Dipti Desai discusses the role of the prying artist, including the artists responsibilities in exploring the nuances of unfamiliar places and peoples through qualitative research, "the question of the artist's responsibility when using what might be called ethnography to those being represented in the artwork is not an issue about accuracy but rather, the "power of representation as a historically specific ideology and practice" (Farquhar, Masuzawa & Mavor, 1998, p. 1) ... The problem with pseudo-ethnographies is precisely that the socio-economic and political relations, which underscore the representation, are hidden." (p.307) In this process I was concerned about my responsibility surrounding the results of the investigation. My aim is not to pin anyone into a category, but rather to discover how people pin themselves. The attempt to represent a person, even myself, fully and accurately is inherently impossible. The act of research, and the attempt to discover more about people are appealing because I enjoy the idea that "the true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths." (Nauman, 1965)

My process involves informal investigative strategies that aim to uncover the ideological content of an array of homes, to inform an installation that explores representation, judgement and domestic inculcation. In this process, I question my power to gather and interpret this information. Because I am more interested in the idea of representation and self-inculcation as acts people engage in, than in actually representing

people, the resulting artwork does not pretend to directly reference any of the subjects who were interviewed. It is rather a blatantly imaginative judgement about the way people activate visual content in the home space, perpetuating their ideologies.

I sent out the questionnaire in two different languages, and did not require a particular length of response. I assured every subject this was a research strategy, and that they would remain anonymous. A selection of the results is available at the end of this document. These are the questions:

Initials:

Age:

Where did you grow up?
Do you feel uncertain about the future?
Name any significant family rituals or traditions you have held on to
Do you identify with a particular religious view?
Which are you most convinced of: randomness and entropy or a calculated universal pattern?
Where do you live now?
What kind of work do you do?
Where do you dream of travelling?
Would you consider yourself a liberal or conservative person? Why?
Do you vote?
Name one object or image you look at every day
Do you have an aesthetic sensibility?

What objects are placed on your mantelpiece? (for example religious objects, awards, books, family photos, unopened mail)

The subjects I sent questionnaires to are friends and acquaintances, so part of my judgement was already tainted through varying levels of familiarity. Although intuition played a large role in shaping the resulting work, the responses to the questionnaire definitely informed my process.

I asked subjects about the visual content they displayed on their mantelpieces because the living room is a compelling space from which to base judgements. It is a normal space, where art often meets a permanent destination. It welcomes both passivity and interaction. It can be the setting of charged family meetings, but is also associated with entertaining guests, by functioning as a display case. The display (the mantelpiece or an equivalent) contains items such as religious objects, awards, books, family photos, or unopened mail, that present particularities of an identity.

This display then, is a mask that serves two important functions. The mask is presented for others to scrutinize, openly welcoming judgement, and also reinforcing identity, the kind of identity previously mentioned, that can be understood as a unit within a larger, popular system. Through the questionnaire, subjects both describe and activate their surroundings. The relationship between object and person is difficult to establish, but it has been explored through art.

Many artists have used the living room, or intimate home spaces as the setting for

exploration of social and emotional issues, as well as a means of addressing the question of what art can be. Robert Rauschenberg employs the home space in his sculptural painting *Bed* (1955), which is rumored to contain his own bed sheets splattered with paint, exemplifying his mantra "Painting relates to both art and life... (I try to act in that gap between the two)." Rauschenberg activates the piece and the bed ceases to be just a bed, instead evoking associations with sleep, dreams, illness and sex. (MoMA, 2004, p. 207)

Robert Rauschenberg *Bed* 1955

Rauschenberg's chair paintings, such as *Pilgrim* (1950), and *Octave* (1960), also exemplify awareness of the political potential of the banal home space, particularly in combination with rebellious abstract expressionist paint application.

In *The Arts of Democracy: Art, Public Culture, and the State,* Casey Nelson Blake (2007) connects the abstract expressionist movement to notions of freedom and democracy. The tendency to approach and eventually cross the edge of the canvas with paint is a freeing act, "...In many cases artists who belonged to the first generation of

abstract expressionists believed that this genre best represented American freedom and used it to highlight the ideals of American democracy in international exhibitions." (p.191) Rauschenberg's work reveals that the home space, even just furniture, can have a political potential.

The home space is also very present in the work of contemporary artist Carol Bove. She arranges appropriated objects on shelves to evoke the societal concerns of the United States in the 1960's and 70's. (Office for Contemporary Art Norway, 2006) The work becomes more than a collection of objects, not just because it references past decades, but because the arrangements of the objects are tense and distanced. In an article about her group show *Age of Aquarius*, the following effect is described "while forthrightly invoking the period, (her) work collectively speaks more to the period's estrangement from the present, a predicament mirroring the fate of (this) generation (of artists)" (University of Chicago Contemporary Art Museum, 2011). Bove's work addresses generational gaps, and the complex confrontation of the present with the ideologies and political views of the past.

Carol Bove *Adventures in Poetry* 2002

Generational gaps are products of incongruencies between domestic inculcation of ideological/political views and the actual circumstances of a younger generation. The outcome of this incongruence is either rejection or eventual appropriation.

The gap is even more complex, considering today's generation has an unprecedented relationship with visual content. Powerful images are confronted constantly in a variety of contexts, most notably through media outlets, such as through television, in print ads, in public spaces and over the internet. These images can be categorized as part of "visual culture", and their political value is much more pronounced and clear-cut than that of art in the living room. In *Visual Culture: Developments, Definitions, and Directions for Art Education*, Paul Duncum (2001) states that "never before in human history has imagery been so central to the creation of identity or the gathering and distribution of knowledge... (never before has) the manipulation of people through imagery been so important to authority." (p.102) Ducum argues for a connection between visual culture and the formation of identity in the face of authority, based on the premise that we internalize messages through repetitive exposure and the use of manipulative strategies that create patterns of desire and fulfillment.

There is a common understanding that images can affect people's socio-political inclinations, if these images appear on television. The political consequences of propaganda or advertising images are well explored. Based on my reflective judgement, an image that

belongs to visual culture is more likely to be experienced many times in short bursts. A political motivation attached to the image will generally reveal itself immediately, and involve surface references to hot-button issues through vague yet powerful language.

An agenda, or a political or economic intent in commercial imagery, reveals itself by falling into traps. For example, an image with an agenda might reveal that it aims to foster insecurity in women by glorifying thin bodies, a well known tactic for dietary supplements. The *Media Awareness Network* points out a general tendency in the motivation behind misrepresenting women, " by presenting an ideal difficult to achieve and maintain, the cosmetic and diet product industries are assured of growth and profits" (Media Awareness Network, 2012). This is one example of a commercial agenda behind an image carried out through popular manipulative strategies.

Constant exposure to images in the media can either condition people to believe these messages, or attune them to prevalent manipulative strategies. The key is that these tropes seem to repeat themselves in images that are quickly consumed and discarded. The fact that most people are affected by advertisement and conditioned to desire a particular way of life cements the ideological impact of visual content by "reflecting the social needs and aspirations of an individual." By definition, ideology directly affects political choices.

Stationery art objects in the home do not function politically with the rapid screech inherent to visual culture. One difference between visual content in the media and the visual content that people surround themselves with in their homes is deliberate

placement. By arranging visual content, people decide which element is most important, which should be most distant, and which political or ideological affiliation to emphasize. People often appropriate prolific imagery, and all of the messages it contains, to make it their own.

Visual content becomes activated, in a sense, like ready-made art, reminding people of their role (both imposed and chosen), and fulfilling the purposes assigned to it.

Activation

The Marlboro Man was just a character in an advertisement until Richard Prince decided to crop it and call it art. Prince exemplifies a contemporary concern with activation, or the notion that the object becomes art when the artist decides to present it as such (Rosenberg, 2005). The notion of activation can be traced to Marcel Duchamp, who caused a shift in the perception of what we can call art by introducing the idea of the ready-made.

In *The Journal for Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Steven Goldsmith (1983) discusses the impact of the ready-made: "more than any other experiment (the ready-made) has challenged the boundaries and even the foundations of art as a concept." The experiment seemed absurd at first, but the "commonplace" objects "held their status as artworks" (p. 197). Duchamp activated the objects, not just by giving them a signature, but by allowing them to speak for the economic and academic interests inherent in the gallery and museum worlds. In a sense, he activated them by giving them political potency.

To some extent, a similar activation can happen in our own homes, with the politicization of visual content we display to remind ourselves, and everyone, who we are within any given system.

The combination of mysticism and activation creates potential for a domestic pattern of inculcation in the home space. People form associations with the spaces and objects that surround them growing up, and eventually either reflect or reject the ideological or political views they were surrounded by.

Through my art process I wanted to channel the generational concern with visual content and the formation of identity. My first constraint was format. I wanted to create a visual experience that seemed familiar and inviting, in terms of shape and size. I placed small objects on mantel shelves, in much the same style as would be found in many of the homes I have entered.

The arrangement of the space invites people to lean in and look at the objects closely, but upon engaging with the piece in this way, mysteries begin to emerge. Though everything is a familiar, intimate scale, all of the references in the visual content I created are obfuscated or reinterpreted.

I chose to reinterpret the objects I associate with prominent ideologies (represented in the gamut of subjects I sent the questionnaire to), in order to question what stake these inculcations have in our future. In order to address the future, I chose

to create my work using futuristic processes. I engraved the mantels and the scarves upon them with a laser. I created designs and patterns for the laser to follow that are imaginative depictions of the psyches I attribute to people who hold various political and ideological views. Many of the art objects placed on top of the mantels were created using 3D printing techniques, accounting for generational distortion and self-inculcation.

Each of the mantels depicts my judgement of a specific ideological affiliation, loosely based on information I gathered from the subject's responses to the questionnaire. They function as portraits, but also self-portraits.

The processes of investigation and art making result in an affirmation of the power of visual content, and its mutative properties, which are directly contingent upon the decisions of the artist, (or the arranger). The act of exploring the extent of our ties to political and ideological views involves identifying our stance within larger manipulative systems, and remaking the visual content these systems infect us with.

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