

Copy This! A Historical Perspective On the Use of the Photocopier in Art¹

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Abstract

Before digital technology had transformed the capabilities for manipulating images and making them available for viewing and download via the Internet, artists were making use of innovative techniques in a genre which has come to be known as "copy art", also called "electrographic art", "photocopy art", "electroworks", and "xerography". Montage, distortion, and transformation were effected through reducing, enlarging, and adjusting the hue and tone, "xerographic" effects which are achieved today through digital enhancements, alterations, and transformations. The referencing of "image glut", "visual pollution", and "image overload" in this reprinted article from the late 1980s by John A. Walker would seem to have much relevance for today when copying technology has moved from the mechanical to the digital, enabling increasingly sophisticated image manipulation techniques with their potential for *trompe l'oeil*—within and without the world of art.

Copy Art: Queues of Students and Electroworks

Every day during term time in the library of Middlesex Polytechnic's faculty of art and design queues of students form to use the photocopying machines, especially the new colour copier. Most of the students are copying photographs, drawings, artwork, lettering and collages rather than texts. In the 1980s the humble photocopier – invented by Chester Carlson in 1938 – has become a crucial tool in the creative process.

Outside higher education too there has been a vogue for so-called "Copy Art" for a decade. (It has also been called "copier art", "photocopy art", "electroworks" and "xerography".) Exhibi-

tions of Copy Art have been held around the world at art fairs, in private galleries and in community art centres. The first major survey of Copy Art – *Electroworks* – took place at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York in 1979. A year later in San Francisco, Ginny Lloyd opened an "electro arts" gallery in order to show local xerox artists, while in New York an International Society of Copier Artists was founded in 1982 by Louise Neaderland to promote the activity.

Members keep in touch via a quarterly magazine which often consists of anthologies of Copy Art. Valencia in Spain is a key centre for Copy Art: in 1983 José Acalá and Fernando Canales of the faculty of fine art teamed up to explore the implications for art of copiers; in 1985 they instituted an International Copy Art Biennale and they have since issued several glossy catalogues documenting the growth of the movement. In Germany Klaus Urbons founded a Museum für Fotokopie in Mülheim. Here in London, the artist-teacher Simon Lewandowski tirelessly supports the medium. This year [in 1989] he curated a Copy Art show at the International Contemporary Art Fair at Olympia and chaired a discussion (with panelists David Corrie, Tim Long and John Stezaker) notable for the issues of art and democracy, art and technology that were raised.

Montage, Distortion, Transformation

What appeals to artists and designers about the copying process? Artists can reproduce existing images (or details of them) selected from the cornucopia of pictures supplied by the mass media simply and cheaply but exact duplication is

rarely their aim. What interests them more are the opportunities for montage, distortion and transformation. In this respect any degradation of the image during copying or recopying is an advantage not a disadvantage. Artists can reduce or enlarge images and modulate their original colours schemes by changing the hue and tone settings on the machine. (Colour photocopiers date from the late 1960s but became generally available in the mid 1970s.) Variations of colour and texture can be achieved simply by inserting different kinds of paper into the machine. By copying on to special materials, image-transfers to fabric or T-shirts are possible. By moving the original during scanning, blurs and smears can be generated. Images can also be reworked by hand and then copied again. Superimposition or layers of images result from copying on to already printed sheets of paper. The same image can be repeated over and over again and then assembled into larger patterns Warhol fashion. Alternatively, different images can be collaged together to produce complex billboard-size murals or room-sized installations.

Artists can also place their bodies on the machine and copy parts of them. Three-dimensional objects placed on the document glass of the machine are reproduced in a distorted fashion because of the machine's shallow depth of field. In short, the artistic potential of the technology depends upon ways of exploiting it that tend to stretch its normal operations and commercial functions.

Democratic Potential

Because this form of art is based on mechanical reproduction and the machines are widely distributed, it has a high democratic potential in the sense that people without artistic training can make examples for small sums of money. This point was made by the Italian artist-designer Bruno Munari as early as 1970 when he installed a Rank Xerox machine at the 35th Venice Biennale for the use of visitors. Copy artists exhibit in

galleries but they also make use of the international Mail Art network in order to circulate and distribute their work: they make postcards or publish collections in book or magazine form. Size of edition tends to be small but additional copies can, of course, easily be generated via the photocopier. Mail Art can be interactive in the sense that artists can add to what they receive and post it out again. Even faster than the mail is the Fax system; Copy artists can annihilate space and time by Faxing their images across the globe in moments.

Low Cost Mass Copying

Photocopiers can also make works of art by professional artists available to large numbers of people at low prices— hence the proposal for “throw-away art” – even though when this happens it challenges the rarity value of art and the financial basis of the gallery-dealer system. It seems therefore a negation of this democratic potential when Copy Art murals are displayed in a community centre in a poor area of East London priced at over £700 each.

However, it should be recognized that many artists argue that what appeals to them about Xeroxing is not its capacity to generate masses of identical images but rather its capacity to generate an endless series of unique, original images. The latter can then, if desired, serve as “sketches” in the creation of larger-scale, more permanent silk-screened canvases (as in the art of John Stezaker). For some artists copying is just one facet of their work but others specialize in Copy Art.

Diverse Artists

The fact that Copy artists depend upon the same machines does not mean that they share a common style or aesthetic. Artists as various as Ian Burn (a conceptual/process artist who made “Xerox Book” in 1968), Laurie Rae Chamberlain (a punk-inspired colour Xeroxer exhibiting in the

mid 1970s) and Helen Chadwick (a feminist artist using her own body as subject matter in the 1980s) have employed photocopiers for very different purposes. Other artists who have made significant use of the machines include: Tim Head, Ginny Lloyd, Sonia Sheridan, Tom Norton, David Hockney, Russell Mills, Carol Key, Sarah Willis, Graham Harwood, Alison Marchant and the Copyart Collective of Camden. Manufacturers of the machines are an obvious source of funding for artistic experimentation with copiers and such companies as Rank Xerox, Canon and Selex have been willing to lend machines, sponsor shows and pay for artists-in-residence schemes.

Creative Responses to Image-Overload

When Walter Benjamin wrote his famous 1934 essay on the impact of mechanical reproduction upon the arts, he did not envisage the extent to which artists would embrace photomechanical technology in order to reinstate the claims of art. Using photocopiers it is all too easy to generate unimaginative results. When Copy Art is poor it seems nothing more than yet another source of image glut and visual pollution, but at its best it is a valuable, creative response to that very situation of image-overload.

NOTES

1. This article by John A. Walker first appeared in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (7 July 1989, p. 16). Reprinted in *Plagiarism* by author permission. For a thorough listing of Copy Art literature, see Reed Altemus' "Copy Art Bibliography" (2003) available at <<http://mitpress2.mit.edu/e-journals/Leonardo/isast/spec.projects/electrobib.html>>

John A. Walker is an author, art critic, and painter. Before retiring in 1999, he was a lecturer/reader in the history of art and design at Middlesex Polytechnic. For more information about his work, visit <<http://www.artology.info>>.