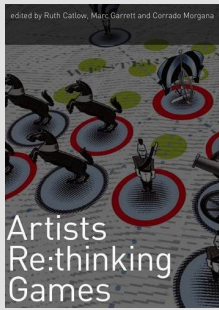




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Grafik Dynamo [2005]



Article by
Alison Colman
 (7/7/05)
 About
 project **Grafik Dynamo [2005]** 7/7/05 by **Kate Armstrong** and **Michael Tippett**

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Grafik Dynamo - At Turbulence.org [2005]

When I first encountered Kate Armstrong and Michael Tippett's Grafik Dynamo after reading a brief description on the Turbulence website, it made me think of the concept referred to as the "Internet Hive Mind." While I don't subscribe to this concept as such, my initial thought when viewing Grafik Dynamo was, "Is this an example of what collective consciousness looks like?"

Unlike the "Hive Mind," described in generally futuristic terms by some proponents as a self-organizing group or team that comes together according to an organizing principle, resulting in an almost-mythical "super-being" fueled by collective brainpower, Grafik Dynamo can (on one level) be described as a literary conduit of sorts for current, collective online activity. In my opinion, this is what makes the work much more intriguing, in addition to more relevant, than ostentatious technotheories. In addition, its function as e-literature, as well as the visual and technical parameters the artists have set for harvesting and displaying images from the Web, distinguish it from other forms of collective online activity, such as virtual sit-ins, for example.

Grafik Dynamo consists of one web page containing three rectangular frames or panels of equal size, arranged across the page in a horizontal line, similar to a comic strip. These panels are superimposed on a larger rectangular shape decorated with a blue and white pattern highly reminiscent of Roy Lichtenstein's Ben-Day dots. This shape, in turn, is superimposed on a black background. Navigation is extremely simple; the links across the top of the page read "Launch," "About," "Kate Armstrong," and "Michael Tippett."

Each panel contains a different image (usually a photograph) of varying size, quality, and content - although most of them seem to be personal snapshots - which is continuously replaced by another image. Instead of being coordinated, the refresh rate for each panel is out of sync with the other two, and the images appear to be refreshed between roughly one and five seconds. The images themselves come from blogs and Web news sources, and are funneled into Grafik Dynamo through an RSS feed from LiveJournal. (For readers unfamiliar with RSS technology and/or terminology, RSS stands for RDF Site Summary, Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication. It is an XML format for web syndication, allowing for the sharing of content between sites. Syndicated content can include, but is not limited to, news feeds, events listings, news stories, headlines, project updates, and discussion forum updates. As a result, RSS provides web users with the opportunity to not only tailor and customize the flow of new information on the internet, but to monitor how often sites generate new information).

These images are not resized to fit entirely the panels' borders, nor are they necessarily centered within the panels. Images larger than the panels are only partially shown, the size of the image determining how much is truncated. This heightens the visual interest considerably, forcing the viewer engage in the exercise of mentally reconstructing the remainder of the image.

If these pictures were resized in their entirety, or chosen according to stricter size parameters, the result would be much more uniform (like a slide show), and would place fewer cognitive demands on someone engaged with the work.

Along the top of each panel is a speech or thought balloons, also refreshed at an asynchronous rate, containing a short question, statement, or exclamation in large capital letters. However, rather than statements along the line of the commonplace POW! ZAP! BANG! variety found in many comic books of the superhero genre, the utterances in these bubbles are considerably more cryptic: "GENTLEMEN, HATS OFF!" "HAD YOU SEEN HIM BEFORE?" "WE'VE LOST CONTROL OF THE MOLE AGAIN, VILLANOVA!" "THERE IT IS, THE SLEEPING MONASTERY." "HMM! I LIKE THE SEASIDE!" "I DON'T WANT NO GOVERNMENT CHEESE!" "THE MAN IS NOTHING BUT A FOOD CHEMIST!" "RETURN TO ME THAT FIERCE GOD AT ONCE!" "ACK." Every so often, a panel will refresh without a balloon, or two panels will contain identical speech or thought balloons.

Placed at the bottom of each of the three panels is a white, rectangular overlay containing a short sentence or sentence fragment refreshed according to the same technique as the thought balloons and images. In a manner similar to serious soap-opera continuity strips, as opposed to "gag-a-day" comic strips, these fragments connote a particular action, plot twist, a character's state of mind, a scrap of conversation, or element of suspense (although the quality of these fragments are much more reminiscent of graphic novels than, say, Mary Worth or Brenda Starr). For example, some of these snippets include, "... THE ROYAL COMMISSION HAD MENTIONED NOTHING..." "...BUT THE BISHOP WILL NEVER COME..." "IT WAS A DECK OF CARDS FOR AMATEUR DIVINATION!" "THE MYSTERIOUS HAND WAS DEFT AND AGILE." "THE COCKTAIL PARTY WENT ON, OBLIVIOUS TO THE MONUMENTAL ATMOSPHERIC CHANGE." "...THE TABLE WAS COVERED IN GLASS!" "THE CROWD SPOKE ELEGANTLY OF THE HORRORS THEY HAD FACED IN THE STADIUM."

Despite the fact that Grafik Dynamo does not afford the viewer opportunities to navigate the work by pointing and clicking, the viewer's engagement with the work can hardly be described as passive; one does not "watch" Grafik Dynamo as one would "watch" TV. As each panel cycled through the text and images, I was constantly attempting to forge a coherent link between the text and the image within each panel, between the thought balloons and sentence fragments within each panel, and between all three panels. I was also trying to see if I could possibly construct a plot of some sort, not as a method of trying to decipher what the artists' larger intentions were in terms of telling a story, but as a sense-making exercise in which I was expected to kluge together a story on my own from narratives and an irreverent, heterogeneous smorgasbord of visual fragments generated by people whose only apparent connection was their simultaneous use of a particular communication technology. It felt almost like I had begun watching a movie which was already halfway done, or a daytime TV drama, in that I was trying to figure out the backstory, along with who the characters were and their relationship to one another.

Cognitively speaking, this is not at all unusual, as humans are hardwired to make meaning from experience. However, I can't help but feel that if the images were less compelling, or treated in a less compelling manner, and if the text was less evocative, I would have quickly lost interest or gotten frustrated (or both). In other words, I am left to wonder if the work would have the same impact had the artists perhaps chosen to harvest images from a much larger range of RSS feeds, or if the artists had not thoughtfully and deliberately composed the text fragments themselves and opted instead to collect text fragments from a broad spectrum of sources. This is why I am reluctant, as some have done, to describe any of the components of this work as "random." On one level, I agree that there is an element of randomness in the sense that there is no particular order in which the text and images are displayed, and that such an order would be meant to convey a clear plot and solid character development. However, if the images and text were generated and arranged completely randomly, I feel that the work would amount to nothing more than a programming exercise, and would no longer be art.

Folklorists, such as Amanda Banks and Elizabeth Wein (1998), have described comic strips and comic books as a contemporary manifestation of folk tales and myths, and that comic book authors often draw upon folk narratives, motifs, references, and archetypes in their work. One could thus argue that comic books function in a manner similar to folk tales in that they are reflections of a collective cultural consciousness, manifested through storytelling and personal narrative. Would it be such a stretch, then, to suggest that perhaps personal blogs have succeeded comic books as the most recent version of contemporary folklore, the newest devices for storytelling and a communal source of meaning? If so, interpreting Grafik Dynamo as a work which relies on the formal and literary conventions of the comic strip to frame a segment of the blogosphere (in this case, LiveJournal) as an example of how blogs have come to play a popular cultural role not unlike one played by comic strips and its predecessors would not be way off base.



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