



The “auto-graphical” illustration as a technological and biographical mirror

Ana Afonso afonso.ana.rita@gmail.com

CIAUD Univ. Técnica de Lisboa - Faculdade de Arquitectura, Portugal

Reference

Afonso, Ana; (2012) "The “auto-graphical” illustration as a technological and biographical mirror", p. 240-245 . In: Barbosa, Helena; Quental, Joana [Eds]. **Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference of Art, Illustration and Visual Culture in Infant and Primary Education**. São Paulo: Blucher, 2015. ISSN 2318-695X, ISBN: 978-989-98185-0-7
DOI 10.5151/edupro-aivcipe-46

Abstract

Our work will address the influence of technology in the construction of a singular graphic voice which, in its own turn, gives body to a collective icono-sphere and Visual Culture. I'll propose a definition of the singular expression of the artist - autographic style - in an attempt to express how this graphic voices mirrored the author's visual biography.

Besides reflection, I'll focus on the construction of identity – its processes - and try to put aside the idea of projection, where techniques and technology are seen as a medium or channel, to present them as substance. - For this idea I've elected digital media as the technology that is giving birth to the present visual zeitgeist in illustration, and present the word/concept Adobots to discuss and validate this theory.

Bridging between authorship and technology, I'll speak both about children; the inner-child of the author and the possibilities of meaning construction they give to children in our present society.

Keywords

Illustration, 'Autographic', Visual Culture, Technology.

Introduction

This text discusses authorship and technology from the artistic and plastic perspective of those who illustrate and contribute to the visual culture conveyed by the illustrated album. Our paper is placed in the standpoint of the illustrator as the author of a visual narrative.

I'll approach the reflexive authorship of the illustrator as a construction of meaning for himself (for his/hers inner child) and subsequently for the otherness – child or reader. In this framework, I aim to underline the importance of the use of digital media involved in the construction of both identities, self and other.

I chose technology here as the responsible for innovation and promotion of new and manifold graphical ways of expression mostly as a substance to be found in the work of art, and as a self-constructing tool rather than in its traditional role of channel or medium for the artist voice.

The ability to identify different illustrators is growing between broader audiences. The picturebook reader (and buyer), when is not looking for a specific story or text, is acting like a connoisseur who searches - either online or in the bookshelves - for his visual consumption's preferences. Here we come to face our central issue: where identifying the illustrator becomes synonymous of recognizing his/her 'autographic style'. Each illustrator's 'visual signature' it's only possible thanks to the junction of two complementary factors: the artist concept and his action/physical manipulation of materials, techniques and technologies that embody his/her 'autography'.



In this sense, I'm questioning the role of coeval technologies, specially the digital one, in the construction of the artist identity that is also the ground base for the construction of sense and identity for the children. Must focus on the globalized use of digital applications for image creation and bring some examples and the perspective of a creative working in this field – as an Adobot (Jon Forss) - in order to demonstrate how technology is connected to auto-graphical style and how this is shaping Visual Culture and aesthetical choices.

In order to approach the author's identity in illustrated albums, we must understand that this identity is visually translated, and presented to the reader as a specific assemblage of the illustrator's personal expression and graphic preferences.

But how is technology (or the use of digital media) related to these visual identities? The first answer that comes to mind is quite obvious: for those who have chosen the use of the computer to produce images – take Beatrice Alemagna's or Stian Hole's digital collage, for instance - we can easily identify the medium, and find elements and a visual composition related to the use of layers, collage, edit, cut, paste, transform and so on, where the word "computer" is imprinted in their personal expression – in their auto-graphical style.

Figure 1. Stian Hole, Portrait and work from the author (2010). Photo by <http://astridlindgrenmemorialaward.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/stian-hole.jpg>

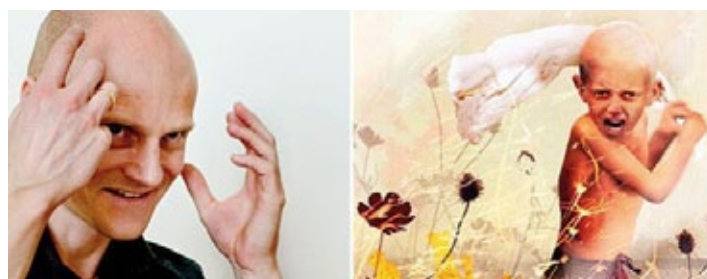


Figure 2. Beatrice Alemagna Portrait and work from the author (2012). Internet photos



This auto-graphical style is based on a construction of visual elements (dot, line, plan, texture, scale, space and color) that expresses and is perceived as a visual statement but also as an "ambience" that is emotionally felt. Emotions arising from the works of authors like Shaun Tan or Sara Fanelli will certainly be different – like listening to Chopin or Debussy.

Each author's work is, in great measure, a mirror, with their own self-portraits - their uniqueness is reflected into what they do and stand for, - like a painted biography or a "visual signature".

Although we generally believe these visual identities are "fabricated" to match the author's emotions, intentions and life choices, the fact is that their graphic styles arise only partly from a previous intention or idea, yet mostly from their symbiotic interaction with tools and technologies. This deconstructs the common misconception about the way fine artists/ illustrators create: after a long period observing images that explain the way we see with the same way a camera takes a photograph, we may start to assume the opposite was also true: the image "inside the head" would be projected into the paper, canvas or screen.



Figure 3. Seeing and projecting mental images (2012). Drawing by Ana Afonso

«It's common to hear that the artist has one idea or a image that he performs on canvas» but that's far away from the truth (Vieira, 2008: 20). Images are constructed in a dialogue: authorship starts in a blank page or screen, but it is the outcome from the author's action and technological possibilities – they are a dynamic system intertwined in such a symbiotic way that one could not exist without the other.

Let's take a drawing, for instance: as we learn to grasp the pencil movements we seem to forget its role in the process of drawing. The pigment provided by the pencil lead is more than a mean to make the drawing happen - it is the substance that allows this drawing to become reality or real, visible, and is this dialogue between materialized action and visual culture of the author that provides the next graphic phrase.

As art and technique are inseparable (Méredieu, 2003: 8), so are author and technology. The pencil or the digital media both play an active role in the visual communication process - their part goes beyond a tool or channel that gives way for the message - they are the message (McLuhan, 2001) and whatever they provide (substance, methods, filters, matter, colors, shapes, etc.) are part of the author's process and identity.

We have drawn a circle at this moment: identity is the author's autographic style, which in it's origin is also consequence of the technology employed, but, as we have seen, the process is not fully under control - we don't project inner images - technology plays a role and images hereby created may be a revelation for the artist as well... so, are we projecting what we are, or else, are we discovering and constructing ourselves within the process?

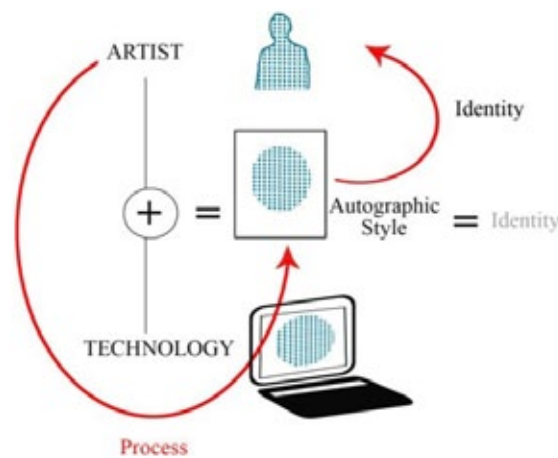


Figure 4. Process and Identity (2012). Drawing by Ana Afonso

Karen Coats speaks about how Postmodern picturebooks «call attention to and celebrate their artistic processes rather than their subjects, or their processes as integral to their subjects (...)» (Coats, 2008: 79) , if the auto-graphical style in these works embodies the process and both generate identity, then the artist uses technology as a self- constructing tool. And if that tool is digital media, he/she is probably an Adobot.



« so what should this new generation of Adobe-fuelled graphic designers/illustrators/typographers call themselves? Adobots. ».

The term 'Adobots' is wonderfully chosen to define professionals in visual communication field that use digital media. In Jon Forss quote here above, the revealed origin of the word comes from Adobe - the biggest company now leading the offer of softwares applied to all fields of visual/audio communication - like Photoshop, Illustrator, Flash, Dreamweaver et al. - but the hidden origin of the word, I'm sure, is a subtle reference to 'Autobots', the humanoid robots (from planet Cybertron) who could transform themselves into cars, trucks and other machines in order to pass unnoticed among humans.

This cybernetic conception is so witty and well adapted to my computer addicted generation - and specially to my professional community - that the term generates an immediate sense of belonging; plus, it is difficult to resist the strong emotional appeal, since these were the cartoons we watched when we where children and, last but not least, Autobots were the good guys.

I'm not saying that an illustrator using digital media or interfaces feels like a cyborg, and of course «It is important to remember that the computer is just another tool, only as good as the person using it.» (Salisbury, 2004: 58) and for sure, as Milton Glaser once stated, "Computers are to design as microwaves are to cooking (...)" (Zeegen, 2007. p.43) but can you imagine a life without microwaves? Or without mobile phone? Or without Internet? Well, neither can some illustrators imagine themselves without a computer and an adequate software. In fact, when you become so entangled and dependent of a tool it becomes part of you. «We shape our tools and then our tools shapes us» (McLuhan, 2001: 35) - in my process of thinking a picture I know there's a place for specific Photoshop intelligence in my visual cortex that helps me to see it through.

To express my own thoughts about the use of digital media, I'll evoke here Marc Boutavant, for instance, in a interview for Varoom magazine (Salisbury, 2007: 32) when he speaks of the experience about drawing with a tablet and how it «introduces a kind of distance to the process, which was good for the thinking process». As a tablet/PC user myself, I'm pretty much aware of this fact, and must confess that, since Photoshop came along, composition issues ('reading' a visual language) became easier. The "Navigator" window, for example, allows us to be simultaneously near and far away from the image we're constructing, which allows us to work close on detailed drawing without loosing grasp of composition.

It's a fact that digital media is transforming the way we think and create pictures, but why is this important in the picturebook's universe? Because Adobots are involved in their production as illustrators or designers - and sometimes even in a full book authorship - they are becoming recognized artists together with their 'Adobot's autographic' style.

As Fine Art turned itself to more conceptual fields in the mid 20th century, stressing its role of engagement and social critique, avant-garde artists deviated their attention to the power of discourse, performance and staging to enhance communication with an audience already seduced by photography, films and TV.

The influence and possibilities of the power of still images were explored by Graphic Design (specially advertising) as Fine Art's (once called Graphic and Decorative Arts in fact) ancient function - the visual and aesthetical education - seemed to be replaced by visual communication issues, so did Fine Artists slowly dismissed themselves from Visual Culture issues as they turned to more social, political and anthropological fields. So, magazines first, and picturebooks afterwards, gave us the possibility of contemplating images taught us to read and perceive the visual language of composition. It was a matter of time before buyers turned to illustrated albums as the affordable canvases of today - with their recognized artists and their autographic styles. So, the changing paths of Fine Arts, together with the availability of personal computers, the Internet boom and the emergence of digital media as common tool, allowed a growing autonomy to designers and illustrators. Adobots are no longer waiting for commission; they are producing picturebooks, cultural objects for consumption and proposing them to publishing houses as an artist has done with galleries. This is the contributions of Adobots: artists that express themselves more freely, readers that can choose from a vast array of books their own particular diet of favorite graphic



styles/ authors, and publishing houses producing picturebooks known to be objects of desire (Hall, 2008: 145) as well as commodities (Withrow, 2009:182).

This artistically approach to picture and book making with complete freedom in what concerns techniques (or technologies) and personal objectives (or self-expression) is giving birth to the most original, acclaimed and prized picturebooks ever.

As a project, the success and authenticity recognized in this books seems to be related with this freedom of « I don't tailor my art to anyone» but also with an unique aspect: the project is conceived with a thorough knowing of its audience - their inner child.

As Martin Salisbury stated « It's something of a cliché that artists speak to "the child within". But it seems to me that if an artist is saying something important to himself, the outcome is likely will have more intrinsic value and meaning than if the preoccupation is with perceptions of audience need, expectation, or audience decoding skills» (Salisbury, 2008 :37).

We can relay on the testimonials given from major personalities: Oliver Jeffers says : «I keep making children's books because I still have them inside of me» - one in his elbow and another in his pinky. Also Sarah Fanelli says « I try to make a book as I like it and would have like it as a child. (...) There is enough of a child in ourselves to know what we liked when we were younger (and still like!)» (Zeegen, 2005: 95). Another prized author, Shaun Tan, reflects on this approach displaying in is own website (<http://www.shauntan.net/about.html>) a picture of himself as a little boy.

I cannot speak for a child except for the one I was and still am. I recall being mesmerized by the illustrations of Anita's Marcel Marlier, or by the beautiful animal prints of Carl Brenders, the fantastic Disney princesses, or the exquisite and fluid lines of Zé Manel. I know they played an important role both as a bridge that helped me to perceive and imagine the world and as a visual influence for elements and moods that I can still identify in my own work as an artist.



Figure 5. Drawing and Reference (2012). Drawing by Ana Afonso (left) and unknown artist (right)

Back then we had illustration made with traditional media: watercolor, gouache, color pencil, or printing, that used paper or canvas as ground. Nowadays, many artists are using mixed media with all these processes, with a big emphasis on digital collage, combined or enhance in Photoshop «the universal medium for digital collage» (Salisbury, 2008:30) to produce the illustrations like the ones we've seen in the first images. Their "auto-graphical" illustration is filling our collective icono-sphere with graphic voices that reflect both technology and personal choices – like biographical mirror.

We've completed a circle once more: singular voices of Adobots are constructing a collective and visual zeitgeist from where other children (and adults) will build memories and meaning to a future cycle of their own.

The connection between artist and its inner child isn't a surprise nor exclusive feature to visual artists. I recall a dear Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa, who also said he could see the world through the eyes of a child that he carried along everywhere (Pascoal,2005:105); also Rosa Montero speaks about the connection between imagination and its inner child (Montero, 2008:61), and then, she also speaks about the feeling that an author is a kind of medium (idem:17), which comes forward to defend our theory that art production is, in great measure, a surprised and a revelation to their authors as well. I believe artists are sensitive to the current zeitgeist, and by expressing their inner desires they are also giving voice to a certain collective



unconscious willing. Since humanity dramas are pretty much the same since greek tragedies, what gives us the touch of our specific time is the technology used, which always will be imprinted in whatever we do, despite the fear and distrust of man in the machine.

Through technology, we are witnessing not only the becoming age of Brave New World or 1984 but also the possibility of producing our self-imagery (Toffler, 1984: 386). While producing our own identity, shaped as a picture or book, we also allow others to relate to, identify themselves with, and appropriate different voices to construct their own singular identities - as a rich and personal collection.

So, ironically, or, if you wish, romantically, our children are being exposed to Visual Culture produce by a group of grown up children that have learned to master techniques and technologies to express themselves. Hopefully, today's auto-graphical voices in picturebooks will help them to construct meaning and project a better world.

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