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Assemblage by Design: The Postcards of Curt Teich and Company

Stephen J. McElroy

Florida State University

Abstract

Composition scholars' recent attention to multimodal design and production has been prompted by a changing technological landscape characterized by the development of new digital and networked tools for composing: desktop publishing, blogs, creative software suites, social media, etc. However, current composing models might be better understood if we also attended to their antecedents—the design- and production-work of new-media texts in bygone eras. This article positions the production of picture postcards in the early twentieth-century as historical multimodal composing, a richly complex yet sparsely documented process of material assemblage (Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2007) that began with black-and-white photographs and ended with full-color, ready-to-mail scenic postcards. Under examination specifically are the processes of Curt Teich & Company, of Chicago, IL, which at its peak was the world's largest postcard manufacturer. By studying Teich production and design through the lens of assemblage, scholars can better understand the ways in which all composing—material, electronic, or otherwise—responds to specific exigencies and is shaped by cultural and technological contexts and conditions.
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1. A Scenario

I'm working a shift in the Florida State University Digital Studio, a composing space where university community members can receive rhetorical and technical assistance with designing texts in and for electronic platforms. An undergraduate student in the English department's Editing Writing and Media (EWM) program enters, explaining that she's been assigned to create an "anti-ad" for one of her classes. The assignment requires her to select an advertisement and alter it slightly to satirize or undercut the original ad's intended message (like a milder version of *Adbusters*). Unsure of how to begin, the student confesses that she is "computer illiterate" and that it's been suggested to her that she come to the Studio to learn about using Photoshop, the capabilities of which she is only vaguely aware. After we talk about her ideas and goals for the project and how such a platform might be helpful to accomplish them, we take a tour of the software's basic functions. Soon, after being introduced to some of the affordances of layers, quick masks, quick selections, and magnetic lassos, the student earnestly concludes: "So this is how they make the people on the covers of checkout-line magazines look the way they do."

2. Seeing/Acting design

In "The Design of Web 2.0: The Rise of the Template, The Fall of Design," Kristin L. Arola (2010) argued that "in a Web 2.0 world, composition teachers need to engage, along with our students, the work of design" (p. 4). She was specifically concerned with the ways in which template-driven web-authoring creates a "loss of design agency" (p. 7),

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arguing that "If we are to enact a meaningful multimodal pedagogy, then we need to make design visible" (p. 13). Making design visible can also enable us—students and teachers both—to develop an appreciation for the nature of texts as products of human labors for rhetorical ends, and it equips us with the ability to better envision new products of our own designs.

This argument extends beyond the realm, even the era, of Web 2.0 templates. In the case of the EWM student who was introduced to the capabilities of Photoshop in the Digital Studio, her understanding of the genre of popular magazine covers was radically altered by having seen one of the potential tools of their design in action (albeit in different contexts). Now, when she walks through the checkout line and glances over at the rack of fashion magazines, she no longer sees images of men and women of impossibly perfect beauty. Instead, she sees the product of a person sitting at a computer using Photoshop. In other words, she sees the *constructedness* of the text.

Having seen the constructedness of magazine covers, she might begin to think about the constructedness of other texts with which she is bombarded on a daily basis. In turn, she may also begin to consider these texts as responding to specific rhetorical situations (Bitzer, 1968) in more or less successful ways. Once (and if) she does, she may begin to think for herself about how different elements from these responses might be appropriate for the rhetorical situations to which she herself is responding—school assignments, professional communications, personal projects, and the like. Thus, in that moment of awareness in the Digital Studio, it's not *merely* that she has seen how Photoshop can be used and can then respond *merely* to situations in which Photoshop is a viable platform; it's that she's potentially seen more generally how a tool can be employed in efforts of design and that, yes, there must be other tools out there that can aid in her designing tasks. Seeing design inspires thinking design—which inspires acting design.

As members of the field, we have attended to design in numerous productive ways, more recently as prompted by the changing cultural and technological landscape. With the advent of markup languages, networked interfaces, mobile and cloud computing, social media, and Web 2.0, composition scholars have worked to understand the implications of these developments for writing, composing, and semiotic production. Likewise, there have been phenomenological studies of multimodal form and verbal content in CD ROM editions (Wysocki, 2001), renewed emphases on arrangement and delivery in the era of the computer-network interface (Delagrange, 2009; Porter, 2008), examinations of ways textbooks are adapting to incorporate digital media (Bezemer & Kress, 2008), and the aforementioned observations on the relationship between template-driven web authoring and design (Arola, 2010). Such work is valuable because it takes stock of and helps us respond to current technological trends.

However, we might better understand the current activity in these spheres if we also understood how it's situated in antecedent composing—the design- and production-work of texts from bygone eras. Investigations into past practices of textual production would build on the arguments, among others, put forth by the authors of *Writing New Media* (Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, & Sirc, 2004). Anne Frances Wysocki, for instance, seemed to forecast Arola's work on Web 2.0 templates when she claimed that she and her coauthors aimed "to make visible, first, how larger material structures are woven in to the practices of new media as we compose texts and, second, how we can work with those structures as we compose" (Wysocki et al., 2004, p. 10). Wysocki explicitly connected considerations of materiality with the affordances of new digital technologies:

> I want to argue that these results of digitality ought to encourage us to consider not only the potentialities of the material choices for digital texts but for *any* text we make, and that we ought to use the range of choices digital technologies seem to give us to consider the range of choices that printing-press technologies (apparently) haven't. (Wysocki et al., 2004, p. 10)

I would add to this argument that we should also actively consider, through both our scholarship and our classroom practices, how digital composing technologies have grown out of—have been translated from—material composing practices. After all, many functions of digital-design platforms indeed have analogue physical processes as their direct antecedents,[1] not to mention the fact that innumerable digitally-designed texts ultimately take on physical and print forms for their intended use. By explicating these historical and sequential relationships between digital designs and physical processes, we gain a fuller understanding of the nature of composing.

Because a good portion of the conversation about design and composing today is centered on Web 2.0 technologies and various forms of social media, we might consider that an appropriate place to start, for such investigations would

[1] Most readers will know, for instance, that the tools in Photoshop are based on physical darkroom techniques.

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