

# Colossus

## Miri Chais

### The Copy-Paste Paradox

#### Moran Shoub

##### ...Things Happen on the Internet

We live in a culture of paradoxes. The very notion of multiplicity—*ribuoy* [ריבוי]—assumes dichotomies; the Hebrew word for culture—*tarbut* [תרבות]—is associated with the word for majority or plenitude—*rov* [רוב]. The paradox, however, is crafty and elusive. Take, for example, the following paradox: The more Coke you drink, the thirstier you become. Namely, instead of an equation (thirst→drinking→saturation), we get a paradox of excess which duplicates itself on and on. In Internet culture, excess and vanity have long lost the negative connotation of being superfluous. Excess and vanity are part of the real thing. Equal among equals.<sup>1</sup>

The empty, vain question "What's up," whose tone is not even accompanied by a question mark, may well be rooted in the logic of Internet surfing, where things chance our way. We surf the net, in search of something, and proximate things surface and present themselves to us, as bargains often do. This is what's up,. And what's up becomes just as important as the essential.

##### ...The Horror of Infinity

Did you know that at present, approximately one billion people use the Internet, a number which will grow towards two billion in the coming years? The information on the Internet is constantly accumulating, from one minute to the next, in huge quantities, and it won't be long before there will be more things on the Internet than people in the world.

Recommended viewing: The Internet of Things -

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfEbMV295Kk>

The more our lives are spent facing the computer, the greater the anxiety of becoming disoriented in the web's infinity, of getting trapped or drowning in it, as if it were

an ocean. This fear is not science fiction; it is a real, analytical forecast. As possessors of limited knowledge, we are faced with a vast body of information which we will never be able to fully embrace. This is the anxiety of the limited (the self) vis-à-vis the infinite and unknowable (cyberspace or God).

### **...Original and Image**

The concept of the simulacrum discussed by Jean Baudrillard,<sup>2</sup> refers to a reality which is a copy for which the original has been lost. A sign devoid of a signified. The television and the Internet (as instruments of the media, the masses, capital, culture, government, etc.) no longer reflect reality, but rather produce simulations and simulacra. Hence, the experience of the user (the one viewing the screen or surfing the web) is disoriented, failing to distinguish between reality, image, original, virtual, real, fake.

Philosophers, such as Walter Benjamin, Slavoj Žižek, Baudrillard, and Paul Virilio, hold that the real and the imagined blend. Simulations of war have become wars in themselves; the collapse of the Twin Towers is still experienced as a television spectacle, and one may assume that the documentation of the recent saga of the Chilean miners trapped underground (August-October 2010) will serve as material for a critical essay about 21st century media culture.

Information flows through the web at the speed of light. It takes less than a minute for information transferred from the other side of the world to appear on your screen. The speed of cyberspace accelerates things in the real world too, reducing the number of acts a person must perform in order to realize them: interpersonal correspondence, bank transactions, news reports, medical information, scientific research—the examples are well known. It is a technological evolution, some say: technological determinism. In other words, technology is the major agent of social and cultural changes; technology which develops at a dizzying speed and forces the virtual upon the real. What in the past required a set of actions now necessitates minimum movement. We have already gone quite a long way toward becoming cyborgs (a combination of human and machine/computer), hence, by definition, we experience the world in a mediated manner. We do not observe the world directly, but rather through computer screens. We do not observe the things themselves, only images of them.

### **...The Collapse of Time and Space**

Due to digital technology which redefines the organization of data in a manner which is nonlinear, non-narrative or non-logical, but rather proximal, blended, mutually invading, available according to the user's associative logic—the time and space of the web are defined as super-time and super-space. Linking places and times, the Internet elicits the feeling that we are everywhere and nowhere; a sense of perpetual nomadism or eternal exile. Miri Chais's figures are always detached. You will not find them within a background or a landscape.

We are, however, willing to take upon ourselves this collapse of time and illusion of space as long as we have an origin / a reference point / a base to which to return and on which to fall back. Usually we find that there is an instinctive clinging or return to the human body, to the body's shape, to the face. In Chais's works there is always a body or a face, or a facial mask. In science fiction movies and second life computer games too, the UFOs and cyborgs have humanoid bodies.

### **...Text: Language and Images**

In the future, the Internet will require total use of a new language. Not a language of nations, but rather the language of a single nation. A new language shared by all. The language of the Internet, which will be largely based on signs.

It was not accidental that in 1975, Alan Watts proposed to adopt Chinese—a language consisting of ideograms (graphic symbols) which are words, a visual language suitable for computers—as an international language of communication.<sup>3</sup>

Ideograms and pictographs (such as traffic signs) are pictorial signs immediately viewed and comprehended. It is impossible to be mistaken and understand the opposite of what they signify; they are not culturally dependent, therefore their language is international. Chais works with pictographs, symbols, and icons which she downloads from the Internet. The web is her library of materials; the collection is vast; the loan—free of charge.

### **...The Copy-Paste Paradox**

The Internet, which takes everything in, has become the source, the origin, the original.<sup>4</sup> Simulations supersede the things themselves. We return to the Internet to gather information: data, text, images. Facts alongside distortions, the vain alongside the significant. Postmodernism has invited us to cull and use available materials and images; availability has now become a value. The gathering practice is simple: copy and paste. Chais does it, I do it, you all do it.

In art history, the technique of copy-paste (or cut & paste) goes back to Dada, Russian Constructivism, Surrealism, Pop Art. Last year the exhibition of collage works, "Mind the Cracks," was staged at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.<sup>5</sup> Among the participating Israeli artists were: Michael Druks, Yair Garbuz, Henry Shelesnyak, David Tartakover, Irit Hemmo, Tal Matzliah, and others. But while the attachment technique of classical collage relied on printed sources (newspapers, magazines, advertisements), the photomontage and later copy-paste techniques rely on the computer as a source. In any event, they involve the use of readymades. By the same token, the soldered sculptures of Yehiel Shemi and Yaacov Dorchin may also be deemed collages. Chais's sculptural works likewise employ this technique.

Copy-paste is also used in animation and video works—take, for example, the animated film *Logorama* which is comprised of commercial logos <http://vimeo.com/10149605>—as well as sound and music works; e.g. the videoclip collage *ThruYOU* edited by Kutiman from YouTube, <http://thru-you.com/#/intro/>.

The paradox is that the more we copy-paste, accumulate and "rob" images, the more we deny the signified, the original sense, creating a blend of signs doomed to end in a blindness plague.

### **...The Internet: Servant or Master?**

As we become inundated by images, we require more and more of them. Like addictive toxins, they lure us. The title *The New New Men* given by Chais to her series of skulls and gas masks which pretend to be ecological, challenges consumerist culture which is always tempted by the new-new-thing; once again—a paradox presents itself: the new-new-thing ages faster than ever. That which served us in the past, now dominates us. The Internet,

which was considered egalitarian-cooperative-free-democratic-subversive, has become institutional-corporate-managed-commercialized, boosting the forces of globalization and market.

We define ourselves in relation to brands. Our lexicon of words and symbols is not original; it belongs to the corporate-commercial dictionary: we "market" ourselves, upgrade ourselves, brand ourselves, and leverage ourselves. Neither a personal language, nor a free spirit. Existence in the space/time of the Internet erodes autonomous social existence in reality, dismissing all criticism.<sup>6</sup>

### **...The Fall from Eden**

As Internet consumers subordinate to the suppliers of knowledge, we lose the ability to experience and understand the world on our own. Our senses have become conditioned by technology. Reality and nature are both experienced through their images, which amount to a hackneyed image bank. Chais judges these forces, but does not sentence them; in her works she presents an artistic contemplation about Internet culture and the experience it generates through its language and practice. Again, Chais uses the Internet as a bank of ready-mades to be used in her works. The exhibition space is modeled as an installation. The audience is invited to plunge in as they would into a computer. Two web images of a river and a net accompany the key image in this piece—the technological giant, Colossus,<sup>7</sup> to and from which everything flows, and whom the visitor confronts.

Chais's works, even the sculptural among them, are characterized by two-dimensional qualities. Cyberspace compresses all perspective. The linear perspective of the digital medium converts the surface of a three-dimensional object into two-dimensional space. Chais's figures are virtually paralyzed, like ghosts of cyberspace. This does not diminish the threat they convey to the viewer. On the contrary—Chais' use of the medium's language and qualities reconstructs the threat they pose to the individual. A threat of losing one's identity, of disorientation, loss of authenticity, poisoning, system-wide collapse.

A (video) river flows into the giant's figure like the river that "issues from Eden to water the garden" [Genesis 2:10] of the Zoharic image of divine abundance or grace (*shefa*) which flows from *Ein Sof* (infinity) and enriches human reality.<sup>8</sup> However, unlike abundance in its enlightened, spiritual sense, the river flowing in the exhibition is a river of

excess which puffs up and magnifies the giant with assorted icons and pictographs: among them ones that indicate a threat and warn against danger, such as biohazard, radiation, gas masks, and a skull and crossbones symbol marking hazardous materials, and in response to them—icons symbolizing environment-friendliness such as recycling, Yin-Yang. And the river continues to flow and overfeed the giant with power graphics of major corporations on the web, such as the Internet browser Google Chrome, Apple's multimedia technology Quicktime, logo sites on Facebook, Twitter, and the like. And the heart yearns to balance the horror, finding among them primordial pictographs, such as the Eye of Horus—an ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic sign standing for well being, or a monk's hands—a Christian icon symbolizing compassion, etc.

Once you enter the computer/exhibition space, you are caught in the lights, and bound to fall into "white blindness."

## Notes

1. Slavoj Žižek, "Coke as *objet petit a*," in *The Fragile Absolute: or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 21-39.
2. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans.: Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, Mich.: The University of Michigan Press, 1994).
3. Alan Watts, *TAO: The Watercourse Way* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975).
4. Shira Aviad, Rino Zror, Moran Shoub (eds.), *Adam Baruch Media: Anthology, 1972-2008* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 2010), pp. 292-293 [Hebrew].
5. Cat. *Mind the Cracks: Collages from the Museum and from Other Collections*, curator Irith Hadar (Tel Aviv Museum of Art, October 2010).
6. Paul Virilio, "Critical Space," in *The Virilio Reader*, James Der Derian (ed.) (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 58-72.
7. "The Colossus of Rhodes was a statue of the Greek god Helios, erected in the city of Rhodes [...] between 292 and 280 BC. It is considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient Worlds. Before its destruction, the Colossus of Rhodes stood over 30 meters (107 ft) high. [...] The design, posture and dimensions of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor are based on what the Colossus was thought by engineers in the late 19th century to have looked like." "The Colossus machines were electronic computing devices used by British code breakers to help read encrypted German messages during World War II. These were the world's first programmable, digital, electronic computing devices." "The new, rebuilt Colossus will adorn an outer pier in the harbor area of Rhodes. [...] the new structure will be a ... light sculpture ... between 60 and 100 meters tall." From the entries "Colossus of Rhodes" and "Colossus Computer", *Wikipedia*, 2 Dec. 2010.
8. Melilla Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar*, trans.: Nathan Wolski (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 2009).