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VIKTORIA
BINSCHTOK
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SEMIOTICS
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'BETWEEN THE BANAL AND THE SUBVERSIVE'

Q&A with Viktoria Binschtok

[Gwendolyn Fässler]

For a while now, you've been engaging with various phenomena related to our modern digital and networked image culture. Was there a specific moment that sparked your interest in digital symbols/emoji? When did you first notice that there was more than meets the eye in this miniature pictorial realm?

[Viktoria Binschtok]

I long had little interest in emoji, until I came upon symbols that irritated me. For example, I found myself wondering about the positive use of the goat, something I considered not so much a compliment as a put-down. I was unaware of the connection between goat and the acronym g.o.a.t. [greatest of all time].

I began collecting other ambiguous emoji, visual codes whose meaning lay between the banal and the subversive. However, the switch from a sign to a code is not always obvious: there are no clear rules and many exceptions. The symbol and code may well look alike but they don't necessarily need to. Sometimes it is only the phonetic ring of a thing that charges it with new significance. In China, for example, users subversively re-coded #metoo by using the characters for 'rice bunny' (which sounds like 'mitu'), allowing them to dodge censorship and create a shared network.

Another example of multi-layered meaning is the peach emoji. For a long time, it represented not only the fruit, but also buttocks. Then the calls in recent years for Trump to be impeached lent it new significance in the political realm, where it cropped up as #im(peach)ment or #impeachtheorangedick.

I mostly conduct my research online, so I reproduce information from different communities. My insights accordingly apply solely to a specific group at a particular moment, for the meaning of codes can change at any time. Especially in illegal contexts, such as drug commerce, codes and slang remain current only until the authorities decipher them.

Digital iconography is omnipresent, but not universally valid. It develops dynamically and has an influence on language, for many expressions from digital communications are taken up in everyday idioms. Insofar, it is more than an exclusive online phenomenon.

[GF]

In the series *Digital Semiotics*, you combine various photographic methods and image sources – from digital collages to recycling your own personal archives to newly generated items. Can you tell us more about your photographic procedure? Is there a correlation between the digital symbols and their mechanisms, which you examine in the series, and your photo-technical diversity?

[VB]

My photographs are not of a documentary nature. I build visual realms in order to represent something for which no visual template exists. Digital icons inspire me to make such images, but my interest goes beyond the individual motif. I am more concerned with a visualisation of abstract content in the contemporary world: with algorithms, digital codes, networking and the like.

In digital space there are no fixed connections between the sign and the message. From facts to fakes, from high- to low-res images, everything mixes and mingles until an algorithm sorts it. The way I work mirrors this crossover of information. When creating my visuals, I put genres and aesthetics on an equal footing, be they snapshots, still lives, found or generated photographic images.

Given the diversity of their genesis they cannot be reduced to a single reading, no more than can the digital symbols to which they refer.

Which method I choose for a symbol often depends on the physical object that I find for it. In general, it's only when I want to depict animals that I draw on found vintage photography. I then look specifically for private snapshots. Besides the animal, there is often something accidental or unintentional to discover in analogue photography; something that we would simply delete when processing images today. These supposed flaws in the image are exciting references to a past in which photography existed solely in material form and was foreseen for especially precious moments.

[GF]

The impossibility of a sole interpretation is at the centre of *Digital Semiotics*. How do you go about translating these deeply complex digital mechanisms into the physical compositions that viewers encounter in the exhibition space? What happens in this re-translation into the physical space?

[VB]

The transfer to physical space is my artistic strategy for addressing digital culture. The change in media shifts our customary perception from the flat display to the 3D realm. This distancing effect is a helpful means to begin to grasp the complexity involved.

In everyday life we switch quite matter-of-factly between online and offline impressions. I'm interested in this intertwined reality and the mutual impact of these two different realms. Online content is in perpetual motion. It appears then disappears. It is not firmly affixed to any one context, unlike my images when installed in a space. In the latter case, another kind of confrontation with diverse content can take place than is possible in the internet's flow.

For the photographic realisation I associate each digital sign with a physical object. Often, things from consumer culture, but some symbols are also renowned from art history, such as Dürer's *Praying Hands*, which

some users interpret as a high-five. So they may be a limited work of art, a gesture, a digital symbol, and at the same time, part of a seductive consumer realm. This migration of signs between epochs, cultures and functions is of particular interest to me.

In their new presence, the symbols are not only visual codes but also a part of narrative photographs without indexical reference. I create visual spaces that can represent the forbidden, the empowering, the intoxicating, the political or even the mundane. They are snapshots of a growing system that structures our exchange of information.

For me, the various slang expressions are a point of departure and a source of inspiration. They pop up surprisingly and divide the recipients into those who get the message and those who don't. The arbitrary interplay of visual codes' form and content leads in part to surreal connections. I like to imbue my still lives with this irritation, too.

[GF]

Your series also highlights how digital symbols like emoji are used to counter platform regulations and foster socio-political movements, among other things. Do you think the growing adaptability of these symbols – their ability to connect communities and expand real-life conversations into the digital realm – represents a lasting and evolving 'space of opportunity' for visual communication and digital image comprehension? How do you see this space developing in the future?

[VB]

Digital space is already – and will continue to be – an important part of social discourse and movements. Debates take place there, moods are generated, and news and fake news are disseminated. Online and offline realities are closely interwoven and, in my opinion, can no longer be kept apart. Global networking is part and parcel of our daily lives, even when we happen to be offline.

For sure, more symbols will see the light of day and also be creatively re-coded, the better to enable unhindered communication. It is not always censorship that causes creative shifts in meaning. Sometimes it is simply a lack of the signs necessary for the desired exchange – for the palette of signs at our disposal always merely reflects socially acceptable norms. What is portrayed is whatever strikes the platform developers as relevant, and so, on the whole, it reflects Western standards.

It is through individual users' participation (applications made to the Unicode consortium) that many hitherto underrepresented emoji have broadened the ranks in recent years, for example, diverse family constellations, types of meal or clothes such as the hijab. The emoji repertoire is thus also a mirror of social participation or its absence. Above and beyond its communicative function, it also plays a vital role as a symbol of identity and culture.

This is why the increasingly close interweave of politics and tech billionaires is especially worrying. In a system with racist and sexist standards, in which data protection is not guaranteed, a coded exchange will be all the more vital.

[GF]

And finally: What is your favourite emoji and why?

[VB]

My favourite is that old-school combination for the smiley. Probably it's the only truly universal emoji and it marks the birth of the visual codes. :)