The image seems innocuous enough. Ireland’s Ronnie Delany stands over a fallen John Landy at the dramatic conclusion of the 1500 metre final in Melbourne in 1956. An iconic expression of the Olympic spirit, the image captures the wrenching disappointment as the gutted favourite is consoled by an unlikely victor. The image’s studium is straightforward, sport photojournalism witnessing a moment of completion, the realisation of the promise of a
winner and loser. The detail that punctuates and disrupts this generic effect is literally a
distraction from the central detail, as you need to stray into the crowd observing the scene for
it to exert its effect. The punctum here is a sensation of the uncanny, an anachronistic
impossibility. It is the image of a man apparently talking on a mobile phone at a time when
television had only just been introduced into Australia (and selectively at that) and
international direct dialling was still two decades away. This image is part of a Melbourne
Olympic Games memorabilia display at the eponymous Olympic Hotel in Preston, a northern
suburb of Melbourne.

In itself the image, while a curiosity, doesn’t amount to much. It has the same *mondo-cane*
style sense of weird novelty, like Erik Von Daniken’s astronauts glimpsed in Inca rock
carvings, the flight paths for extra-terrestrials on the Nazca plane in Peru, crop circles in a
Wiltshire barley field or images of Christ or the Madonna in vegemite toast or a Big Mac
from Mexico City. In critical remix, the found object is certainly not enough. An act of
counter-denotation is required to alter the morphology of the image, to translate it into
something else, something it was never intended to be, nor could have ever been, but can
become. When the image can become a different iteration of itself, it is always already an
image of someone using a mobile phone. Like anagrams, which generate lexical variation
within a finite set, linguistic denotation must also, and at the same time, be a *detonation*, an
explosive reprogramming of the image’s semiotic DNA. This is what we set out to do with
the *Secret Gestural Prehistory of Mobile Devices* project, to seek out other images like the
one found at the Olympic Hotel.

**Morphology**

What if the semiotic DNA of an image could be recoded, interfered with, to irresistibly alter
that contract, to supplant the image’s noeme? What if the accidental, the whimsical or indeed
wilful misprision could transform the unlikely into the only possible meaning? This means
nothing short of short-circuiting the semiotic contract of the image as a supplement of and for
the real. Within critical remix, the metaphysics of the real yields to that of the irreal, the
fabulatory insinuation of a real in excess of the real, the prescient announcement of a real yet
to come that, after Borges, needs only to be possible for it to exist. What we want to describe
here is a morphology of this shift in a selection of indicative images from *The Secret Gestural
Prehistory of Mobile Devices*. As we described in the *Secret Gestural Prehistory* blog, the
visual archive foreshadows the “psychopathology of unconscious gesture in search of a purpose... (the) unconscious of contemporary media culture's obsession with the occupation of the hands. It is a familiar, too familiar gestural ergonomics, a bodily pantomime imagining an indispensable, intimate apparel that has modified the body's relation to itself and remote others. At times this seems ordinary, in the form of a glancing touch of the ear, a casual glimpse of one's own hand. Yet it can be uncomfortably distorted, a contortion of ear and shoulder reminiscent of the arthritic malaise known as St. Vitus' Dance. Or an obsessive flailing of the hands while talking to oneself, as in certain pathological forms of mania and hysteria. These images are suggestive of gestural rhythms that synchronize the hand, the ear, the eye and the mouth. In this they foreshadow the potential media that will, in time, resolve these postural gestures into a meaningful function: the immediate and continuous communion with unseen and absent others” (Tofts & Gye, 2010).

Literal

With many images in the archive the caption is not necessary to set off a semantic chain reaction or interference of the image’s semiosis. Some have a convergent and suggestive immediacy that brings to mind gestures that have become part of the technologically modified body. These are suggestive of the pleasant aesthetics of coincidence. The 1976 photograph of two women in a Manhattan jewellers, for instance, is for us an indicative image of the techno-mediated body. The older woman in the background cradles an analogue handset between her left shoulder and ear that in a weird way is more contemporary for us perhaps than that of the woman in the foreground whose gesture resembles a pre-mobile ergonomics, even that of an ironic “I’m talking on the phone” pantomime.
http://www.secretprehistory.net/?p=642

This is for us the heraldic *mise en abyme* of the entire project. It is an image, in miniature, of the expansive journey of postural distortion suggesting the becoming-media as intimate apparel associated with the vectors of mobility. This was something of the response we had when the *Atlantic Monthly* ran a feature on the project in 2010 (Madrigal, 2010). One of the many blog discussions that followed included a comment on the image of a guy jogging in Central Park in 1976: “this guy really looks like he is rocking an iphone”.
Here too is the intuitive, becoming third nature of the seamless punctuation of immediacy by mediation, of doing something, in this instance, jogging, that not so long ago would require a more elaborate and labour intensive rupture of the event; a definite pause, stop jogging, go to a phone booth, have a conversation, resume jogging.

Here the two actions are co-existent: the seemliness of different things are seamless, as in a suturing or stitching together of separate and even discordant elements. Here, to borrow from Derrida, is an aphoristic counter-time. Paul and Linda McCartney visit Bill Wyman backstage at a Stones concert New York in 1978. The mediated countenance of both Linda and Paul distract the eye and the ear respectively, suggesting something, perhaps, of the quality of their company (the caption for this image reads “Bill basks in self-congratulation, knowing that at least two people bought, or at least have seen Stone Alone. Its influence exceeds his expectations as Paul McCartney brings a new inflection to ‘the look’”) (http://www.secretprehistory.net/?p=315). The idea of the “look” was developed early on in the history of the project, to capture anachronistic, pre-mobile gestures that would not emerge till the end of the century but seem to have been anticipated in Swinging London. For instance, Students, University of Sydney, 1969.
http://www.secretprehistory.net/?p=615

This is accompanied by a literal caption describing what is familiar to us via the “look”, but also of the social displacement associated with mobility. The kid is there but not there, present, but absent; the familiar punctuation of the social by a tacitly accepted multi-tasking of orality and literacy, of talking and texting.

Another example, Melbourne University Student 1967, unwittingly adds a nuance to the idea of the academic Trivium: grammar, logic, rhetoric, banality.
Here we see at work the notion of performative utterance per se, simply for the fact of its possibility wherever, whenever. “Whatever, whenever” sounds like a patented slogan for a telco/mobile phone dealership. It’s no accident, of course, that Sadie Plant’s notion of “enforced eavesdropping” was coined in relation to a Motorola-commissioned study of mobile phone use in 2001) (Plant, 2001). The cultural critic Mark Dery wrote an eviscerating 2010 essay on the same topic called “The Age of Always Connect”, in which he described the pathogens of over-sharing and the implicit death of shame that comes with it as the psychopathology of our mobile times. The essay is a cautionary tale about the allegorical aspects of mobility explored in the Secret Gestural Prehistory images, the double-headed hydra of mediated solipsism (the silent fixation on screens that makes “solitude portable”) and the unwanted broadcasting of privacy (“the stranger with the headset, chattering blithely about her irritable bowel as she elbows past you at the supermarket meat counter”) (Dery, 2010).

The doxa of certain physical contortions and gestures to do with cradling a phone to the ear while carrying two bags of shopping and opening a car door is now so imprinted on the
psyche that when we look at historical images it seems, uncannily, to be the only possible explanation, even in the event of its impossibility. A group of students in Tel Aviv in 1968 sit talking in the sun. The caption, “Yet another early instance of cervical spine dysplasia” pretty much says it all, as well as referring to another image in the blog that it self-consciously cross-references.

http://www.secretprehistory.net/?p=610

The contortions of telesthesia range across class, anonymity as well as celebrity. Two shots of John Lennon captured during the White Album sessions in 1968 reveal a new locution of the body to do with a new medium, that finds a new use for the body akin to the becoming prehensile of the thumb in primates on the way to lighting fires (http://www.secretprehistory.net/?paged=8).

Or putting out fires, as in the case of a group of protestors in Saskatchewan in 1979. The caption underlines the point: “Citizens of mixed heritage (metis) denied the status of ‘treaty
Indians’ blockade the entrance to a national park in Regina, Saskatchewan. Reinforcements will soon be on their way”.

http://www.secretprehistory.net/?p=145

The anonymous image of a sheep farmer in the Wimmera in the 1940s similarly engages quite self-consciously with a mobile narrative: “Checking the latest bale prices from Dalgety. The loyal heeler awaits the resumption of his master’s voice”.
http://www.secretprehistory.net/?p=12

And fittingly, trend-setting teenagers in Australia in 1974 proved once again that the antipodes is a relative concept, as a bunch of Melbourne sharpies prove that *The Coloured Balls* and Conte cardigans were not the only thing on their minds (http://www.secretprehistory.net/?p=256).

**Relational**

Ostensibly a writing project, *The Secret Gestural Prehistory of Mobile Devices* tactically juxtaposes captions with images to generate a composite meaning that suggests an alternative to what we are looking at. The suggestiveness of the relations between text and image is crucial, since it enables a dramatic, rather than didactic engagement between viewer and image. The moment of realisation, of seeing something that might not have been immediately apparent, is akin to the generative force of a Joycean epiphany, the sudden manifestation and radiance of, in this instance, the unexpected *quidditas* or whatness of a
thing. This was very much the motivation behind the caption for the image of an unnamed archaeologist in 1908: “One can only wonder if the classicist Eric Havelock drew inspiration from this image while writing his Preface to Plato (1963).

http://www.secretprehistory.net/?p=232

It is indeed a fitting emblem of his ‘silent revolution’”. The caption not only frames the image, but re-defines it. As in this image of Andy Warhol and Mick Jagger from the early 70s: “At first appearance this image suggests that Andy has clearly had enough of Mick’s relentless talk about himself. A closer reading reveals Mick’s displeasure that his friend prefers the company of others not even in the room” (http://www.secretprehistory.net/?p=304).

The relational aesthetics at work here seem to be perhaps always in potentia, as Aristotle would have it, in relation to photographic imagery. What we were surprised to find, though, was how potent this dramatic relational aesthetic was in relation to the rich and varied history of visual art. It would seem that the unconscious becoming of mobile ergonomics has always been part of the Western imagination at least. One may not be surprised, then to encounter during the Renaissance such an image of technological innovation, as in Botticelli’s “Three Miracles of St. Zenobius”, from 1500-1505. The rather droll caption, “The fourth, unforeseen miracle in this image would only become apparent several centuries later”, is
deliberately dramatic, in the Aristotelian sense, in that it prompts the viewer to seek out the fugitive image of the miraculous.

http://www.secretprehistory.net/?p=300

Even the imagination of the late middle ages seems to have been preoccupied with the unconscious lure of a modernity to come. In Bosch’s 1475 “The Cure of Folly”, the allegorical image of folly that is central to the image, when detonated by the caption, re-wires the image in such a way that, once seen in this light, is difficult to see in any other way: “Medieval allegory bespeaks a folly to come, in the form of grandiloquent banality. Researchers at the University of California (Davis) recently identified a previously unknown Latin inscription in this image, discovered from X-Ray analysis of the book teetering on the nun’s head (historically taken to be an image of folly). The text, “Non ultum. Quis es vos usque?” roughly translates as ‘Not much. What are you up to?’”
The centrality of a meta-narrative of “the look” to the history of modernity became a recurrent theme as the project evolved. This was irresistibly suggested by a Eugene Atget portrait of a vernacular street scene in 1900: “Eugene Atget unwittingly captures an image of an unforeseen expression of literary modernism in the streets of belle époque Paris” (http://www.secretprehistory.net/?p=179). Again, this is where the caption, as a micro-narrative, re-writes the image in the diegetic process of the telling. A 1967 image of the Velvet Underground in situ at the Factory focuses attention away from John Cale, who seems to be the focal point of the shot, on to Paul Morrissey in the background: “At the Factory with Andy’s latest find, The Velvet Underground, collaborator Paul Morrissey has tuned in and turned on. With a discreet turn of the head John Cale senses what is happening and is keen to succumb to the new habit” (http://www.secretprehistory.net/?p=306).
In an image of Warhol and Jonas Mekas from 1965, the banality that Warhol made famous in his signature utterance of “gee” seems to be the downplayed, underwhelmed vibe of the image’s portent of a banality to come (http://www.secretprehistory.net/?p=308).

And of course we all learned to love the alien during the 70s. Ziggy not only played guitar, was well hung and snow white tanned, but he also blew our minds (http://www.secretprehistory.net/?p=72). Images such as this one (and there are many others like it) almost preclude the need for a caption; the relational situation of the image under the rubric of something called *The Secret Gestural Prehistory of Mobile Devices* is sufficient to make it bristle with an impossible echo of a past-future tense. The strategy of the double-take, the invitation to look again, was also a key to the tone of the captions, as in this image of John Lennon in Hamburg in 1962: “Rare image of John Lennon distracted during a performance at the Kaiserkeller Club”.

http://www.secretprehistory.net/?p=68
Other images irresistibly invite a more mischievous approach to the relational intimation of a hidden narrative to be discovered. In such examples a more expanded and ponderous approach to the writing was required. An unidentified man at a picnic in Madeira in 1959. If the punctum doesn’t find you, the caption prompts you to be more responsive to its possible call: “The *Echium candicans syn fastuosum*, not to mention Malvasia, Terrantez and Verdelho may well be known throughout the world. Here we see the innocuous, vernacular potential for a new Pride of Madeira”.

http://www.secretprehistory.net/?p=138

Similarly, the image of a group of young Italian lace makers in 1959 is irreversibly short circuited by a rather oblique caption: “Dating back to 1530, *Lo Giuoco del Lotto d’Italia* (more commonly known as Bingo or “Housey Housey”) was the first known instance in
Western culture in which participants observed the call to ‘eyes down’. These young Italian women respond to the irresistible call of another”.

http://www.secretprehistory.net/?p=136

This project, and others like it, discipline their objects into loose coalitions that only hold together as long as they are held together. In this case, the detonation that reprograms the image is temporary and will only last as long as it is remembered by the viewer – who will often actively seek out their own sample to add to the mix. In this sense it fits with Ted Colless’ description of the “trans-” which he argues suggests “drift and errancy, as disciplines cross each other with the eventful possibility of collision or collusion but without the eventuality of their consensus” (Colless, 2011).

In the spirit of critical remix, it is appropriate to conclude by speaking through someone else, in an act of remixological ventriloquism, as Mark Amerika would have it: “This transit of disciplinarity is itself unsettled by an etymological alternation between being a passage ‘across’ states (a transfer that doesn’t lose its sovereignty or citizenship) and an extensive
vector ‘beyond’ states, but into nothing. This transit implied in the transdisciplinary is, then, a freedom of movement only in the most negative sense: of dispersal and dispossession of properties, of annulment—a crossing over but without merger, without decision, without profit, without any positive value. It is an eclipse” (Colless, 2011).

REFERENCES


