

## ***Probing the Psyche of the Information Age: Repella.net***

**A Digital Art Web Site Review in OpEdNews.com**

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When visiting <http://www.repella.net>, the first thing you are struck by (seemingly literally) is a barrage of small digital photographs portraying grasping, grizzled, black-and-white hands, appearing out of the nowhere of an inky black square, swirling out at you rapidly en masse, then each just as suddenly disappearing, the totality continually replaced by an endless stream of equally "gripping" images: We're not in Kansas (or any other Red or even Blue State) anymore; we've entered the alternative, intuitive, yet cognitive and utterly fascinating and challenging universe of photographic, semeiotic, and mixed media artist Don Repella.

"Repella Industries," as he terms this site of his works, has as its objective no less than "synthesizing replicated sentience": After applying my own sentience to this phrase and other expressions of the artist's statement (Repella's prose tends to expand vocabularies as well as perspectives) and experiencing the artwork that follows, I realize that the artist is illustrating—praising, satirizing, or even condemning—the often subliminal, yet all too real power of those who create images or words or sounds—or more to the point, those who put images and words and sounds together—in order to stimulate desired ideas and feelings in person

after person, like so many consumers of any other—yet less potent—products mass produced. Heavily involved for years in community access television, Repella is concerned with the fate of individuals under the influence of our modern mass media. (In one ongoing project of countless facial portraits, distorted and presented in gridworks that surround the viewer from floor to ceiling, Repella notes "any sense of the individual is lost in a fluid, carnivalesque crowd of faces.") In this examination of the individual among the masses, he is not unlike the late Andy Warhol; however, Repella's art is less gaudy, more (appropriately) subtle, (ironically?) unconcerned with the famous, and completely concerned with the anonymous (to the point where individuality itself is commonality). This is art that unflinchingly probes the deepest psychological recesses of the Information Age, which permeates every aspect of contemporary life.

The banner on the homepage of Repella Industries sets the tone for what we are about to see in our voyage of cyberspace discovery. The banner consists of a series of exquisitely rendered photographs, side by side (Many of the works in his collections are diptychs, triptychs, or higher polyptychs), depicting subjects that at

first seem completely unrelated (mannequins, people in masks, parts of anatomy, objects in nature, signs around town, abstract geometric designs, what have you) but upon further examination and pondering provoke notions, feelings, or (dare I say) messages reinforced especially by the consonance and dissonance of line, form, space, lighting, or other elements of composition (The photographs range in color from stark black and white and sepia monochrome through subdued chroma to richly vibrant hues, each appropriate for the particular subject, contrasting or harmonizing with adjoining images). Many of his subjects are portrayed realistically, in ultra-graphic detail; others are distorted, as by use of optical lenses or digital software, to the point where they are unrecognizable to the human eye but not unaffecting to the human psyche.

"Sentience" can refer to either conscious thought or subconscious feeling; Repella's art is wonderfully affecting on both levels.

The Repella Industries website is divided into four parts: Repella.net, the main gallery; Forums, primarily for students in Austria taking Repella's online course in photography through Danube University (Repella has an MFA in photography and has long taught the subject, in person, in colleges across the United States); Repellacorp, the "gift shop," shall we say; and (take a deep breath) the "Multi-Cultural Ur Programming and Neo-Psychedelic Laboratory and Research Institute"—these latter two sections of the website are still in development; indeed, Repella explicitly states that his art

overall is a work in progress, "continually evolving" (by a demonstrably intelligent design).

Repella.net, the main gallery, "exhibits the personal existence, artwork and commodification [a mass marketing term if I ever heard one] of don repella. It is intended to be an archive and repository for various digital artifacts that naturally accumulate in contemporary life. ... The media is composed of images, sounds, scripts, video, text and just about anything else that can be used or has been used to create expression or provoke thought."

In addition to a large and varied collection of photographic works, there are video pieces (some with audio spoken in German or other languages, the sound rather than the meaning of the words essentially the art) and also a mixed-media section, which includes plans for a walk-in installation, "Llano Estacado," in which "the participant or group of participants will be enveloped by a multitude of large-scale swiftly moving images and repetitious sounds that are directly effected by the participant [by means of video-projection computers connected to heat- and motion-sensors]. Each moving image segment is meant to invoke thoughts of language and memory in the participant. The structure of the piece is meant to simulate the way I perceive components of language and memory are formed and accessed by the human psyche, in individuals directly affected by a society that invests in the simulated and places worth in replication." This uniquely dramatic, ambitious project is currently in the design and funding phase.

It is worth noting that in addition to captions in English and Japanese, some of Repella's photographic works include large square patterns of black-and-white, mosaic-like designs, which the artist informs me are translations of messages into a bar-code-like language used in commerce. Note the semeiotics, if you will: English uses alphabetical characters, uniform and mechanical, meaningless in themselves, meaningful only when combined in words; Japanese uses ideographs, scripted and lyrical, meaningful in themselves but sometimes also conveying a higher meaning when combined together; the square-code language uses geometric designs, intentionally mechanical, yet undeniably aesthetic, meaningful in themselves but presumably not combined syntactically (from item to item) in commerce.

And that leads me to what I consider the core idea of this technically gifted, thematically challenging artist's work. In an age in which we are bombarded with countless pieces of data, in countless variations of form, identity and meaning are oftentimes lost in the mix; the hierarchical patterns that may be discerned can take on greater individuality than even the individuals that compose the collections.

Endlessly stimulating to both left- and right-brain, the visual and other artistry of Don Repella is at once cautionary and inspiring: We are effectively warned that as individuals in a modern mass society we can be overwhelmed by the sheer volume and complexity of the information to which we are exposed—including each other's individuality, arguably our most

precious possession—but we are also reassured that as thinking, feeling, sentient beings we can find uniqueness and meaning—including humanity—in the world if we only open our eyes and ears and minds to see and hear and truly appreciate the trees as well as the forest.

"Repella Industries"

Digital Artwork by Don Repella

<http://www.repella.net>