Translating Things: T-Shirts and Humour in South Auckland

This paper will discuss the development of comic T-shirt designs by the Pacific Island community living in South Auckland. These T-shirt designs feature visual and verbal analogies prompt viewers to perceive humorous implicit connections between American and NZ commercial imagery, hip-hop culture, urban experience and Polynesian ritual practice. This genre of T-shirt art was developing rapidly when I did fieldwork research in the summer of 2001. I have suggested that it is helping the Pacific community to define an imaginative, socio-temporal landscape that spans Southside LA, the islands, and the immediate urban environment.

Gell’s model of artist-recipient relations discussed in the paper on traps: i.e. the nexus of preconceptions and expectations that bind the artist and the audience together - will be used to think about the way that visual analogy can articulate wearer-perceiver relations. The issues that interest me are: What kind of contextual resonance is it possible to harness through clothing that would be compromised in a gallery setting? How does T-shirt design mediate wearer-perceiver relations a) in South Auckland and b) cross-culturally? What vocabulary do we have for thinking about non-verbal translation? Has analogic humour emerged in response to recent experiences of migration and globalisation, or does it have a longer history in the Pacific? How does the cloth nexus in South Auckland differ from other examples of wearer-perceiver relations in the regions’ history?

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