



---

## Untitled (Notes on the Graphic Unconscious)

Avi Alpert

The idea of a graphic unconscious in modern critical theory can most straightforwardly be traced to Walter Benjamin's brief essay on "The Mimetic Faculty," where he notes that "graphology has taught us to recognize in handwriting images that the unconscious of the writer conceals in it." The idea appears relatively straightforward: our handwriting reveals elements of our mental life through the form of our writing which do not necessarily come across in the content of our words. It builds on basic Freudian insights, as well as an early 20th century "science" of mind which looked to understand the relationship between our conscious faculties and our ability to control our inner desires. Against the Cartesian revolution which attempted to banish doubt of internal thought processes, these sciences (of somnambulation, hypnosis, etc.) sought to reconcile the presumed necessity of an enlightened subject for good governance with the obvious fact that the vast majority of our mental processes lay beyond our control.

As such, the relatively simple idea of a graphic unconscious has rather explosive implications. The writing subject, (which is to say, the revolutionary subject of the Declaration of Independence or the Declaration of the Rights of Man) supposedly capable of persuasion, reasoned argument, and so forth, is betrayed by the very form of writing. The evolution of printing presses should have, at some level, obviated this problem. By hiding the hidden—that is, by concealing what handwriting would reveal—the printed word allows for a degree of standardization that makes rational subject formation possible. (Even mistakes here become encoded: we speak of typos and not Freudian slips

in typing, although "slipping" is precisely what the fingers do when they type a word differently than the one consciously intended.) In the ancient philosophical quarrel between speaking presence and written word, the two come to coincide with the removal of the unconscious in the typed word which appears equally in official print media and the teleprompted speeches of today's politicians.

It is important, then, that Philagrafika's 2010 exhibition, *The Graphic Unconscious*, draws its title from a different moment in the work of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin proposed an interesting analogy in his essay, *A Small History of Photography* (1931):

*"It is through photography that we first discover the existence of th[e] optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis."*

Let us ask a provocative question: Is there a print unconscious? If so, where does it lie? Just as printed materials have become so ubiquitous in our daily visual culture that they pass unnoticed, so too have print processes become an integral part of art-making without being acknowledged. Can the ethos of printmaking serve as a framework for understanding contemporary artistic production? Can a close reading of the realm of contemporary art from the perspective of print help illuminate, in some way, our understanding of the world?

To speak of a "graphic unconscious" here is not to speak of what is revealed in the psychoanalytic slips of personality, but rather in what the social matrix itself obscures in the very move to print culture.

The conceptual formulation of the show thus owes as much to Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* as it does to Benjamin. The question here is not the psychoanalytic moment of individual psychology, but rather the functional repressions, disavowals and slippages of society at large. Indeed, this does not remove the individual, it only forces us to confront the personal psyche as a worm in the blood of a vast (and often prosthetic) social organism.

Consider, as an example, Sue Coe's daring piece, *Helping Hands*, which appears amidst a number of excellent works currently on display at the Print Center. Coe displays the much mediated images of post-earthquake Haiti in a virulent black and white that shows in many ways the graphic and political unconscious of the tragedy. The graphic element is the way these images are stripped of their unconscious in media representations. Anderson Cooper covered in blood and soot, Pat Robertson covered in mania, Tom Hanks in self-righteousness.



Sue Coe, *Helping Hands*, 2010  
Woodcut

Each, in their own way, reaches out a hand to Haiti under the banner of “help” (indeed even Robertson), but it is never clear what the actual (unconscious) intention of those hands are. For whom or in whose space does one speak? What unspoken desires mingle with the ostensible need to send money and help Haiti? How does the notion of help obscure the figure of “helping” the native which underwrote the colonial decimation of Haiti for the past four centuries, continuing through the ousting of the democratically elected Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004? At the same time, what genuine outreach (most obviously that of Paul Farmer), might offer a democratic, infrastructural form of help? What methods of *learning* to help are there still to be employed?

These forms of domination or genuine concern or apathy or empathy or love or racism that might appear in the graphological unconscious, which are erased in the modern media, are enabled to reappear in Coe's work. One need not make here some grandiose statement on the viability or necessity of print culture in such an environment. Nor is it necessarily to unduly laud an artistic representation when the real work remains on the ground and in the backrooms of local and global governance. But the specificity of the graphic unconscious here, at the very least, allows for a conversation to happen which is otherwise repressed daily by the repeated calls for an “apolitical” discourse to help those in need.

***Avi Alpert is a graduate student in the Program in Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania. He writes regularly for Machete.***

***This article first appeared in Machete Vol. 1, Number 5, February 2010.***

**[www.marginalutility.org/category/machete-group](http://www.marginalutility.org/category/machete-group)**