



Contemporary Malaysian consumer culture and the creative role of experiential space: Reinterpreting sale and promotional advertising through installation

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Abstract

Our consumer spaces are filled with extensive ranges of sale promotions of different products in a variety of prices that play a significant role in stimulating our senses. These sale promotions play a prominent role in the consumer's decision to purchase goods and services. Repetition and similarity, difference and variation are the characteristics of this mass culture; they provoke a response and act as a catalyst for communication. These aspects of advertising stimulate our visual experience, affect our moods and emotions, and create the illusion of values and choices. This research project investigated the aesthetics of Malaysian consumer culture through exploration of the use of visual images based on the principle of repetition and variation (similarity and difference). The key artists within the research context were Andy Warhol and Allan McCollum, with their method of mass production and the use of popular mass produced images; and Andreas Gursky who represented consumer obsession and desire through shopping activities. The project established correlations between repetition, similarity and difference as they contribute to the variety of visual messages in advertising. It also contributed to the field of installation art by creating experiential environments that could evoke complex multi-sensory responses to the colours and images of advertising and significantly stimulate temptations and pleasures of the retail environment.

Keywords: advertising, consumer culture, difference, installation, repetition, variation

Introduction

Desire and obsession are two most important elements driving our consumer existence, and a few ways in which people relate to each other socially are through the mediation, aspiration and pursuit of acquiring things, which lead to the expression of personal desires, rewards, gratifications and even glorification. Hollein (2002) connects our purchasing of goods with daily life, stating that 'purchasing is much more than the mere satisfying of everyday needs: it is the important ritual of public and communal life, through which identity is created and changed' (p. 13). Furthermore, Norimah (2015) suggests that 'marketing comprises one of the efforts taken by the producer in introducing and promoting goods or services in the market' (p. 116). Therefore, we often don't realize how much we spend on shopping because we are always buying what we want, and not what we need. So we just keep on buying, falling prey to the advertising promotions and marketing by retailers.

Our daily experience is being confronted by repetitive objects caused by mass industrial production, both similarities and differences in appearance. This makes choosing a very confusing activity. There are many brands of similar products with different forms and prices. The concept of everyday low prices is indeed a tool used in shopping complexes and retail outlets to lure and tempt customers. With the constant bombardment of advertising materials invested by these shopping centers to ease and coax our

consciousness into continuous buying culture. Crawford (2000) suggests that the obligation to buy implied by the active exchange of bargaining was replaced by the invitation to look, turning the shopper into a passive spectator, an isolated individual, a face in the department-store crowd, silently contemplating the merchandise.

The signature gimmicks like 'sale', 'best buy', 'discount', 'reduced', 'stock clearance', and sale figures such as 10%, 25%, 50%, 60%, 80%, etc. can be seen virtually everywhere and all year round. These promotional campaigns function well and have been proven necessary when terms such as consumer's loyalty, market expansion and projected growth and targeted sales figures are achieved and celebrated. As Spector (2005) suggested, '...a strategy of competing strictly on price is fruitless — because *everybody* has a low price, or close enough' (p. 55). The visual information is out to confuse us, but this is all part of a strategic move that aims to stimulate and generate a superfluous consumer culture where the sale promotion is (re-) coded as a desirable psychological sign (Wernick, 2001). Furthermore, Adhwa Hasmin (2012) argues that consumer 'not only to obtain utility or service from purchased commodity, but to achieve gratification through the buying process itself' (p. 32). This is the aesthetic of the new market place, one that manipulates our desires through endless variation of choice in lieu of the true value. They produce variations in emotional effects in different contexts and we as consumers are attached to them very closely.

Project outline

Through the medium of screen printing this research project has examined the aesthetic of sale promotions in the context of contemporary consumer culture. The research has involved investigating the principle of repetition and variation, and how it influences the environment visually, psychologically as well as emotions. The images used are taken from promotional catalogues, flyers and pamphlets from various commercial shops and supermarkets. Visual elements are extracted and abstracted within the work. Through the medium of silk screen, these visual elements are reproduced and repeated within specifically constructed spaces that reflect the consumer's world. The aim is to create a series of environments that reflect the habit, personality and life styles consumers and in which the viewers will experience how mass-produced images interact, stimulate perception, communicate and influence emotions. The project is concerned with the idea of the aestheticisation of consumer culture, represented as follows:

- To construct visual aesthetic based on the principle of repetition and mass- production utilising subjects from mass media and products of mass consumption.
- To create a metaphor of the repetitive experience of mass culture environment through complex visual installations.

Related theoretical ideas

Repetition: Similarity and difference

'If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four, If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on. Eventually one discovers that it's not boring but very interesting' (Cage, J. in Phillips, 1999, p. 149). This is what repetition is all about, the organizing principle of rhythmic structuring; often regarded with the notion of similarity and standardization as well as uniqueness and difference. Repetition is the main element of human experiences, which involves the re-experiencing of something identical, [and] is clearly in itself a source of pleasure (Freud, S. in Kawin, 1972). As our daily life is always 'confronted

with the most mechanical, the most stereotypical repetitions, inside and outside ourselves, we endlessly extract from them little differences, variations and modifications' (Deleuze, 2004, p. xviii).

Repetition expresses the feeling of being identical but at the same time it also employs the characteristics of difference. We usually experience what we feel to be the same generally and structurally, and simultaneously, we are met at every aspect with nuances of difference. Baudrillard observed, 'No object appears on the market today in a single type, but with a range of strictly marginal differences - of color, accessory, detail - which create the illusion of choice'.

Repetition presents the pleasure principle as a generative mode as well as a provocative one. Through the form of similarity, repetition is a major strategy for producing emphasis, clarity, amplification or emotional effect. According to Krauss (1987), the copy or replication (or in other word similarity) is directly referring to repetition as she explains about repetition and its relationship to the grid in contemporary art practices:

Structurally, logically, axiomatically, the grid *can only be repeated*. And, with an act of repetition or replication as the "original" occasion of its usage within the experience of a given artist, the extended life of the grid in the unfolding progression of his work will be one of still more repetition, as the artist engages in repeated acts of self-imitation. That so many generations of twentieth-century artists should have maneuvered themselves into this particular position of paradox — where they are condemned to repeating, as if by compulsion, the logically fraudulent original — is truly compelling (p. 160).

In relation to the repetitive effects, Warhol's silk screening method of industrial reproduction evokes the kind of copy and irregularity which simulated the commercial necessities of multiplicity that can be found in the advertising or mass world. The use of screen printing technique enables him to produce multiple identical images. He said, 'I think everybody should be a machine',² and 'I think it would be so great if more people took up silk screens so that no one would know whether my picture was mine or somebody else's'.³ The nature of mechanical process allowed repetitive multiple versions of the images or products to be produced. Warhol noted how the repetition of mass produce manufactured products drives standardization, which creates equality and similarity in value and appearance in consumer spaces:

...You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke too. A Coke is a Coke, and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same, and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, and you know it.⁴

However, the utilizing of mechanical processes of reproduction also contributes to a scheme of difference and variations, and introduces the idea that repetition does not exist. Gilles Deleuze believes that repetition and difference have a reality that is independent of the concept of sameness, identity, resemblance, similarity or equivalence. This idea can be found in Warhol's explanation on the character of screen printing:

In August 62 I started doing silkscreen. I wanted something stronger that gave more of an assembly line effect. With silk-screening you pick a photograph, blow it up, transfer it in glue onto silk, and then roll ink across it so the ink goes through the silk but not through the glue. That way you get the same image, slightly different each time. It was all so simple and quick and chancy. I was thrilled with it...⁵

Deleuze (2004) suggests that true repetition is closely tied to the idea of difference - every repetition contains its own uniqueness. He states repetition is a necessary and justified conduct only in relation to

that which cannot be replaced. Repetition as a conduct and as a point of view concerns non-exchangeable and non-substitutable singularities. His conception of repetition is intimately connected with difference and possess to singularity, which multiply to develop variability. '...no two grains of dusts are absolutely identical, no two hands have the same distinctive point, no two typewriters have the same strike, no two revolvers score their bullet in the same manner...'⁶ Deleuze adds that every idea relatively linked to the mode of difference and the representation of difference refers to the identity of the concept as its principle. On the other hand, the form of difference to each idea may be replaced or disguised by repetition. He says the repetition of a work of art is like a singularity without concept, and it is not by chance that a poem must be learned by heart. The head is the organ of exchange, but the heart is the amorous organ of repetition.

Related art practices

Andy Warhol

Warhol chose his imagery from commonplace or everyday objects. His signature style used commercial silk-screening techniques to create identical, mass-produced images, in variations of colour to give each print a different look. Incorporating techniques of sign painting and commercial art into his work, as well as commercial literary imagery. In the 1960s, he started to make screen prints of famous American brand-name products like *210 Coca-Cola Bottles* (1962).



Fig. 1. *210 Coca-Cola Bottles*, 1962

The work is about *sameness*: same size, same colour and same fame as a product. Through the repetitive iconography Warhol was mirroring society's obsessions, promulgated through advertising's concern to evoke feelings of desire. Heartney (2001) states that his photobased works enshrine a version of reality that is composed entirely of readymade images originally produced for the purposes of tabloid journalism, advertising, promotion and entertainment. Though we see them as familiar objects, Warhol is more concerned with the representation of ambiguous signs. Siegel (2001) writes that Warhol predicted a social and artistic shift in emphasis from production to consumption.

Allan McCollum

Using a different element of the consumer context, Allan McCollum's artworks challenge our perception. For example, his *Drawing* series consists of more than 2000 small pencil drawing works in rectangular frames, which represent shapes developed through the repeated combination of around 50 templates. Each

of these framed drawings depicts a symmetrical black shape against a white background. The black shapes are abstract and taken from household items and everyday objects; they could be vases or minarets, diatoms or door-knockers, ice-cream cones or crowns.



Fig. 2. *Drawing*, 1998-1991

The entire space is dominated by the display of frames on both tables and on the walls. The installation turns the space into some kind of display of products or frames in a retail shop. Our perception is confused by the similarity of repetitive objects we experience dealing with mass industrial products in everyday life. As Kastner (1993, unpaginated) writes, ‘They are each unique, but are presented in a way which obfuscates their singularity. They all look the same, but only superficially; actually they’re all different, but only minutely’. McCollum’s works bring our attention and recall our memory to daily life environments, which demand desire and interaction that expresses our individuality. As McCollum explained:

Mass-produced objects are everywhere, each but a sample of thousands. For this reason, they inspire fear and awe. It is fascinating in these circumstances how attached we all are to objects and how emotional these attachments are, how impossible it is to separate ourselves from them.⁷

Andrea Grusky

Andrea Grusky in his work entitled *99 Cents* (1999) sees the commodity as resources to meet desire, obsession and satisfaction. This work shows how the commercial products offered at a low price in the supermarket context. Various types of products and brands in variety of forms fill the shelves sales. The work represents on how the factors of price and promotion affect and influence consumer in the context of purchases. Satisfaction not only comes solely from the aspect of possession of an item, but the factor of purchasing the product also heavily influenced by the price element.



Fig. 3. 99 Cent, 1999

This atmosphere also symbolizes how the situation there is a glut of commodities on the market by the manufacturer and how sellers try to attract the attention from consumers through various forms of promotions. Consumers are not only tied to product as necessity in life, but it needs more to build emotional satisfaction. Featherstone (2007) argues:

...there is the question of the emotional pleasures of consumption, the dream and desires which celebrated in consumer cultural imagery and particular sites of consumption which variously generate direct bodily excitement and esthetic pleasures (p. 13).

The studio investigation

Products are made in widely different ranges, and have different brands and variations in prices. We as consumers try to find the best for less or, in other words, the best value for money. There are thousands of different products in variations of range and with only small marginal differences in price. We normally do not concern ourselves about the small differences in every product and usually we choose the product depending on the impression suggested by the package or advertising - the appearance of design as well as the sale promotion. This variation of products in repetitive and different forms, sizes, designs and colours creates an overall harmonious environment that generates a unique visual pleasure. However, this is not always easy and we usually experience the complexity of choosing from hundreds or thousands of similar products in different prices.

The project has tried to represent this experience through multiple inter-locking coloured aisles that use donut, shoe and supermarket products as the subject. Conceptually the idea of this project is simple, however it was very technically complicated. It took me quite a long time to design all possible combinations and variations that can be created from the subject matters.



Fig. 4. Jusco sale promotions (example)

To choose from thousands of images on sale catalogues is not an easy process. I had to make several alterations through cropping, extraction and abstraction using a photocopy machine as well as manual touch-ups. The images are the products that can be found in any supermarket, department store or retail shop and basically the items are ones that we deal with almost everyday: toothbrush, cutlery, shoes, cookware set, ice cream, hand bags, food and drink, shopping bag, etc. The project began with the idea to create a “package” as a product representation by combining images, bar codes and signs that can be combined in many different ways.



Fig. 5. Product bar codes (example)

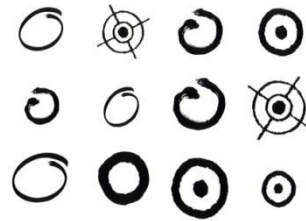


Fig. 6. 2 variations of signs

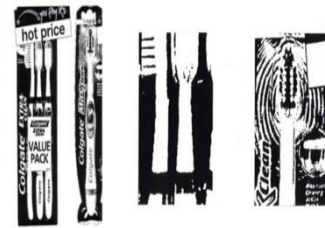


Fig. 7. Example of extracted images

The bar code designs for the background are combinations of hundreds of product codings that have been repeated in variations. Whilst the signs that give the graphic quality to the images are the modifications of various signs from adverts that are repeated in different sizes. The combinations of 60 images, 48 bar codes in 13 colours and 12 signs in 13 colours can produce over 5.8 million variations. However, the composition of the sign on the images are all different, or in other words the combinations and variations are almost infinite. The composition comprises more than 450 packages.



Fig. 8. Example of extracted and abstracted images from sale catalogue

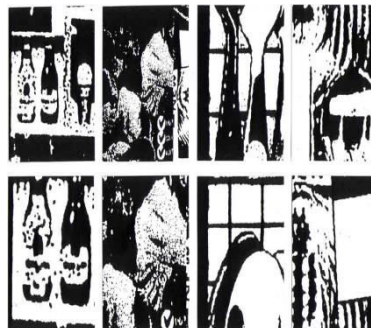


Fig. 9. Example of images complete with coloured signs and codes

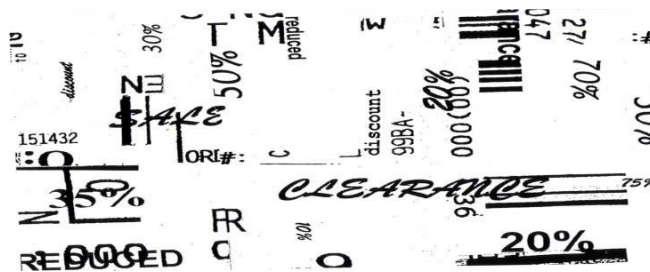


Fig. 10. Composition of variation sale promotions, discount percentage figures and bar codes (detail)

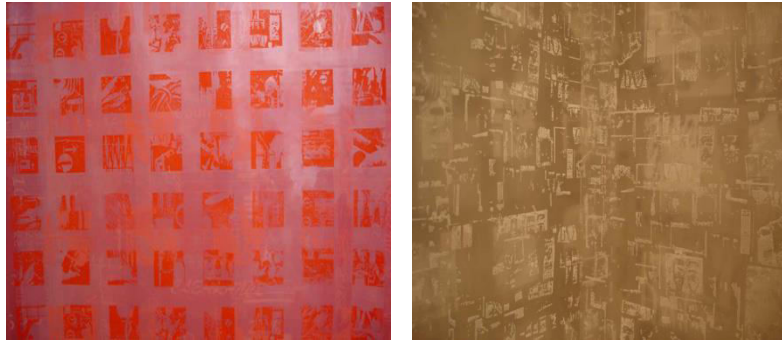


Fig. 11. *Orange and white composition (example)*

The next stage was to create multi-layered images that produced multiple reflection and illusion through variations in tone and intensity by using light and dark contrast through monochromatic compositions. I used the same images (packages) but made changes in cropping, close-up and enlargement. All layers also use the same images but variations in image - extraction, size and quantity. The sizes combination for white composition is 9 x 9cm, 12 x 12cm, 17 x 20cm and hundreds of repetitive small images; and for orange composition is 9 x 9cm, 12 x 12cm, 20 x 17cm, 35.5 x 35.5cm and one panel that made up of a composition of various sale promotions, discount percentage figure and bar codes. This composition contains repetitive words in a variety of font types and sizes such as 'clearance', 'discount', 'reduced', and sale figures such as 20%, 35%, 50%, 75% that are normally used in advertising promotions.



Fig. 12. *Example of donuts in variations of images*

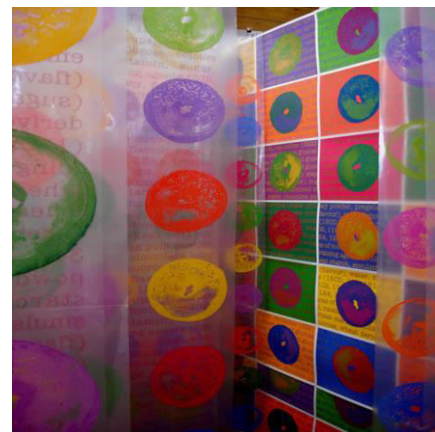


Fig. 13. *Composition experiment*

For the third section, I want to evoke a sense of happiness, enjoyment and fun from combination of bright multi-coloured images. I use the image of donut as a subject matter to represent temptation of colours in certain objects or products that influence our impression and reception. The colour combinations on paper are divided into three sections where each composition contained four different combinations and arranged in the alternate order. Whilst the images on plastic are divided into three sections, two of them contain donut images: 27 big images in 12 different colours and 48 small images in 10 different colours, and one section that contains a text which describes the ingredients of the donut. The overall composition comprises over 600 images.



Fig. 14. Shoes sale catalogue and new composition (example)



Fig. 15. Printed images (example)

The final part uses the light and dark contrast through monochromatic combination using three colours: red, green and yellow. The composition of the colours also suggests the harmonious principle of cold and warm contrast. I use the promotional advertising slogan 'Buy 1 get 1 Free' and repeat the text to cover the whole background of the images to create visual complexity. It comprises more than 500 images based on the repetition of eighteen shoe advertisements complete with brands, logos, models and prices. Every colour contained twelve images – six of them are different and another six are the repetitive from the other colour.

The Shop was exhibited in a 'Bicara Sifu' exhibition, Petronas Gallery, KLCC in 2011 that comprised over 3000 images, which covered the entire installation space. The background is covered by the combination of printed panel – beginning with donut and follows by package and shoe images at the end of the space. The middle space are fill with printed images on plastic arranged in alternate format. Every group of panels is different because the positions of the images and colours are variants that can be combined in different configurations. The room or space is totally enclosed by hundreds of repetitive images, covering the entire walls and the space in-between, in which the viewers become an integral part of the surrounding. In addition, the works are designed to create interactive spaces through multiple interconnected aisles where the audiences are encouraged to walk between the layers of multi-coloured images. The glowing colour infused the space into chromatic perceptual experience. The interesting aspect of this work is its ability to change viewers' senses and emotions simultaneously.

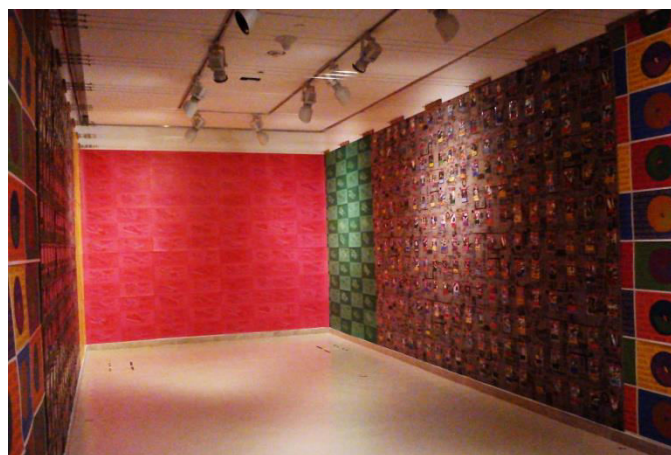


Fig. 16. The shop (Background composition)

The space is visually inviting. Reflections of the extensive repetitive multi-coloured images and cast shadows encourage an impression of a dynamic harmonious surrounding which lent another powerful

dimension to the viewing experience. As the audience walk through the space, their eyes and minds are completely absorbed by the glowing colour combination. The translucent quality of the plastic generated the visual illusion of overlapping images as well as brightening the colour. In contrast, the repetitive pictures incorporated into the work contain two kinds of visual information - images and texts (the information of the product) - that have the elements of similarity and difference. The visual information is very confusing, especially the designs (repetitive images) and the prices such as \$99.99, \$119.99, \$129.99, \$149.99, etc. For the viewers it is almost impossible to determine all the aspect of sameness and variations of repetitive images within the space.

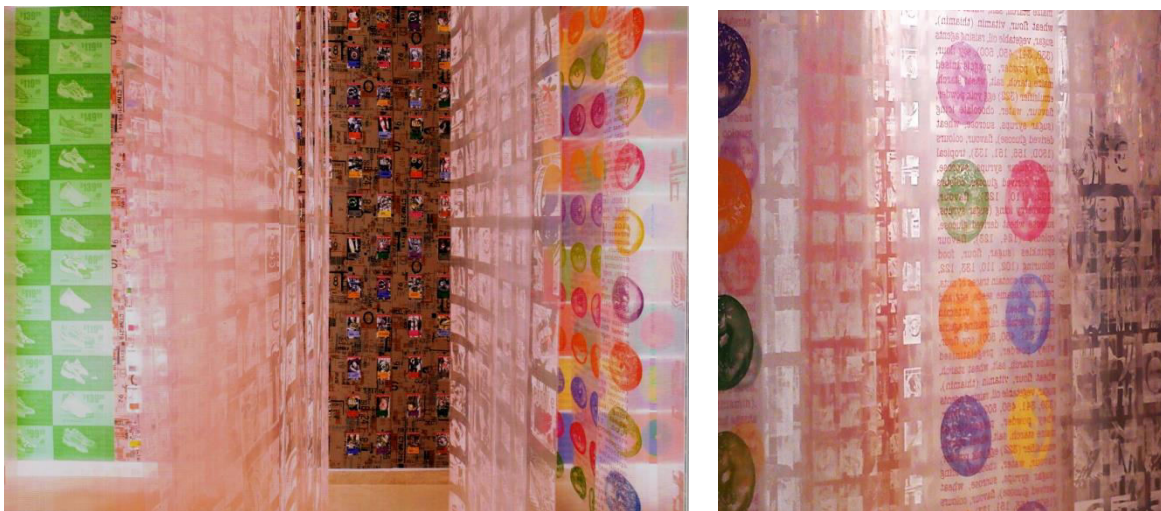


Fig. 17. *The shop*, 2011 (installation view and detail)

The installation turns the space into some kind of display of products in a retail shop - actually the situation that we experience at the moment we enter any shop or supermarket because we are not really sure what we want or what to buy. We may go to several shops: looking, trying and comparing - especially the designs and prices of different brands - until we find something that satisfies our desire. This is the complex experience that we usually encounter which has been created by the elements of repetition and the variations that dominate our market place. Some audiences may feel they are inside a giant box or warehouse full of a tremendous display of products. Even though the environment is pleasant and inviting, people is easily get confused by the repetition and variations of hundreds of similar forms: size, shape and also same materials as well as similarity in appearance. This is the reality of the products in the market place, which have been produced in varieties of type and range that give a consumer the various kinds of choices that create the illusion of values. This situation is the fundamental premise of retail spaces, which the aesthetic of consumer goods, the glamour of things, create a synthetic environment of permanent desire and wanting to be desired (Hollein, 2002).

Through its repetitive mode, this work forms a complex visual vocabulary that creates a sense of continuity and infinity while the audience finds it almost impossible to determine which images are similar and which are different. Just as in the supermarket or any retail shop, the consumers are not really aware of the small marginal differences among the products. The density of the composition on the background and the repetitive images, colours and text that are arranged in grid formation stimulates an active visual experience which our eyes jump off from one images to another without any focus. This creates the feeling of never-ending movement.

The Shop created a strong association with consumer spaces and our experience of them. The repetition of mass-produced images in various combinations could create the feeling of disorientation. At the same time, the work may also invite the viewer to search for order within the riot of images.

Conclusion

The work has explored strategies for the representation and critique of consumer culture has been to create experiential space that can evoke complex multi-sensory responses to the repetitive images of advertising. It has been employed as an art practice that reveals how repetitions and variations affect our decision making as consumers. The work also establishes correlations between the principle of repetition, similarity and difference in mass culture as they contribute to the variety of visual messages in advertising promotions that dominate our everyday experience. The use of common images from advertising brings to mind a strange sense of familiarity that leads to some meaningful articulation of our memory and emotional responses to the mechanisms to the capitalist market. Through representation and exploration of repetition and variation, this project provides a visual account of why we celebrate and enjoy the nature and character of consumer culture.

Notes

- Quoted by Owen, C. (1983). 'Allan McCollum: Repetition & Difference', *Art In America*, Vol. 71 No. 8, September 1983, p. 132.
- ² Quoted by Alloway, L., (1974). *American Pop Art*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., p. 113
- ³ Quoted by Danto, C., (2002). 'Soup To Butts', *Art Forum*, September 2002, p. 52.
- ⁴ Quoted by Mercurio, G. & Morera, D., (2004). *The Andy Warhol Show*, Ginevra-Milano: Skira, p. 67.
- ⁵ Webexhibits, 'Andy Warhol Marilyn Prints'. Retrieved on 20 May 2012 from <http://webexhibits.org/colorart/marilyns.html>
- ⁶ Deleuze, G., (2004). *Difference and Repetition*, London: Continuum, p. 29.
- ⁷ Salvioni, D. (1986). 'Interview With McCollum And Koons', *Flash Art*, No. 131, Dec. 1986-Jan. 1987, p. 68.

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