

The Digital Age has found its way into regions of the globe largely untouched by the Mechanical Age before it. Throughout the Third World, computers sit in schoolrooms that never saw typewriters, cellphones buzz where telegraphs were unimaginable, MP3 files play where LPs never did. The poor, the earthbound, and the indigenous, long the subjects (not to mention victims) of advanced technology, are now its confident operators. In his series of *Encoded Textiles* Guillermo Bert symbolizes, even embodies, this newfound mastery by collapsing traditional and newly invented methods of communication into one another.

Interestingly, Bert was motivated to undertake the *Encoded Textiles* project not (at least initially) by any lofty grasp of the digital revolution and its global effects, but by an observation he made that took him by surprise, an observation that itself collapsed the prehistoric and the new: visual forms currently assumed by digitalized information resemble patterns found in native peoples' artifacture. Specifically, the geometric patterning that, in one form or another, predominates in the textiles of "First Nations" throughout South and North America bear to Bert's eye an uncanny resemblance to the latest means of encoding data into digital triggers: the Quick Response, or QR, code.

Over the last decade, Bert's work has evolved out of painted imagery and toward a more direct material and conceptual critique of society. Halfway through this evolution, he produced a series of bas relief paintings juxtaposing symbols of government and commerce with the then-ubiquitous vertical scorings of bar codes. Such codes had become universally recognized (at least in the developed world) as signifiers of price and acquisition. Paired with images of the Statue of Liberty, the White House and the like, Bert could broadly infer the buy-ability of anything and anyone. As QR codes came not just to replace bar codes but to outstrip their penetration of media worldwide, Bert recognized their far broader, and ultimately more benign, function – and chanced thereby upon the fortunate visual rhyme QR codes maintain with "native media."

As opposed to the numerological, quantifying function of the bar code and its limited readability, the QR code can contain a vast range of varied information accessible to anyone with a decoder (such as an app in a smart phone). The QR code thus represents a quantum leap in information storage and retrieval. The graphic intricacy of the QR code, certainly in relation to the jail-bar-like stripes comprising bar codes, would seem almost to prefigure the rich substance stored within. The vivacious geometries of QR code graphics in fact restore elegance to the "face" of electronic communications not seen since the rhythmic patterns of IBM program cards.

QR codes were thus bound to attract the eye of an artist like Bert in his increasingly focused search for social ironies within the context of visual culture. The resemblance of QR codes to the geometrical positive-negative patterns found in Native North and South American weaving struck him as especially promising. "With this new technology," he has written, musing on the ominous and increasing presence of such coding in our daily lives, "our identities are digitized and, in the process, may be stolen or lost – parallel, perhaps, to the identities lost by indigenous peoples or immigrants. This project intends to poetically reverse this process, using bar codes to symbolically reclaim and restore identity."

Although the *Encoded Textiles* project will eventually include the Western Hemisphere, including the participation of Mayans in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula and Navajos in the southwest United States, Bert began it in his native Chile. This decision was as much rhetorical as strategic. To be sure, Bert could draw readily upon personal contacts and knowledge of the region, as well as his relative fame as an expatriate artist who has gained recognition abroad. But Bert was making a point as well by commencing his efforts with a people far less known than their North American counterparts, but sharing a similar history. (The Mapuche, a tribe known for its fierce territorialism, suffered more after the mid-19th century, at the hands of the Chilean government, than they had at the hands of the Spaniards – a history more like that of Native Americans in the U.S. than in Mexico.) By bringing the Mapuche – a people in the midst of a dogged cultural and linguistic revival – to the forefront, Bert implies the universality of the tragic but now hopeful indigenous experience.

By beginning his project with the Mapuche, Bert also highlights the poetics particular to their civilization. These unfold in the supporting documentary material, including films of several engaging protagonists such as Machi (i.e. "medicine man") Juan Curaqueo, bird-caller Lorenzo Aillapán, and poet Graciela Huinao, as well as the weaver, Anita Paillamil, whom Bert brought to Los Angeles for almost 2 months to realize four textiles. The QR codes at the heart of these textiles seem hardly at odds with the aesthetics informing the weavings. When scanned, however, the stories of the aforementioned Mapuche people come to life on the screen of one's cell or pad. By modifying Mapuche artifacture, then, Bert has infused it with the breadth of Mapuche culture.

Guillermo Bert has based his elaborate project on a simple, if imposing, premise: human technology, however used, measures humanity – all humanity, not just specific civilizations responsible for specific devices. Mapuche weaving is essentially a Neolithic pursuit, while the QR code is an Electronolithic invention; and, as such, they differ from one another less in human accomplishment than they do simply in capacity. And art, that most human of perceptions, brings them back together.

Peter Frank
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