

COLLABORATION AND PURPOSE

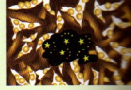
Myriam Thyes, in her online and public screen collaborative project **Flag Metamorphoses**, worked with a number of other artists and animators to play out ideological and political preoccupations as they were embodied in the symbols and aesthetic resonance of national flags. Thyes explains: 'For the last 15 years my themes have dealt with symbols, myths and visual signs from architecture, politics, films or religions. My works are explorations of their meanings – a questioning, a reassessment, a "destabilisation" and a creation of new associations. In order to undermine entrenched representations, I work directly with them to develop them further, transform them and then juxtapose them against new representations. I use animation, abstraction, collage and found footage (video stills) to present critical views of the current political, (psycho-) social, cultural and religious systems. I reconsider abstraction and graphical aesthetics as a means of critique in our over-saturated media culture, proposing that simplicity and imagination can still move us.'

Thyes's work is a very particular response to what she describes as a very human 'double wish' to have both an individual identity and yet belong to a bigger group, often represented through nations, which are themselves 'imagined communities'. On her choice of flags as iconic stimuli, Thyes recognises that their symbolism often endures beyond the actual conditions a nation lives through, sometimes remaining largely aspirational: 'Flags have become very significant again during the last few years - in sports, politics and fundamentalist propaganda. In 1996 and 1997, I worked with flags as installations

in public areas: I created and painted new designs and symbols on flags and hung them beside and between official flags. In the last three years, I started working again with themes I had used before in painting, drawing and photo assemblies, but this time with animation.'

Working in such a direct and politicised way, Thyes saw the opportunity to embrace both a democratic approach to the creation of work responsive to a core theme while engaging with other artists, but also in relation to its dissemination to a global audience on the World Wide Web: 'Thanks to the Internet, I got the idea and possibility to open the flag animation project to other artists, and so it started growing. **Flag Metamorphoses** lays stress on the relations between nations as changing ones: only in the permanent recreation of values, symbols and ways of life, in mixing with others and differing from others, that identities, cultures and societies stay alive. I gather as many individual and international points of view about flags as possible. I approach artists, designers and whoever is interested in contributing to **Flag Metamorphoses**, through mailing lists, websites, personal invitations, lectures, workshops, presentations of the project in exhibitions and festivals, and every possible way.'

Inevitably, this level of engagement prompts differing approaches and levels of interrogation. The political level looks at relationships between neighbouring countries, colonial ties and cultural imperialism. On the other hand, the artistic level examines the collapse and revision of largely geometric forms into more amorphous, organic and fluid configurations.



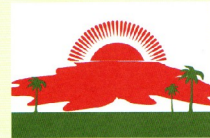
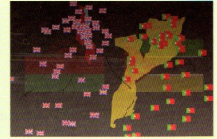
Since 1986, China has lost more than six million hectares of arable land to cities, factories, roads and deserts. At the same time, soy bean imports from Brazil to China have increased 10,000 per cent. The pulp size now by far the most important item on the bilateral balance sheet. *Pic: China Thyes addresses these issues symbolically in her film.

Thyes herself has created a number of flag transitions – one dealing with the Spanish invasion of Mexico; another the centrality of Calcutta to the religious, cultural and economic tensions between India and Bangladesh; further, the colonial exploitation of the Congo by Belgium and its Western affiliates. Much of the **Flag Metamorphoses** deals with conflicts as this was the original context in which the flag found its purpose. It is Thyes's view that 'peace can only be achieved and maintained if people can create, celebrate and adapt their own symbols of identity, and respect the symbols of others.'

IRONY AND EXPLOITATION

British digital artist, Ronna Innes has created a flag metamorphosis addressing the relationship between Malawi and Mozambique, where internal strife – flooding, drought, endemic poverty and overwhelming debt – has contributed to the ease with which colonial exploitation of rich mineral resources has taken place.

Innes uses the common colours and forms in the flags of the two nations to play with the irony that the countries pride in their landscape and resources – including uranium, gemstones and gold – has been significantly undermined by warfare, extreme climates and the actions of the Portuguese in Mozambique and the British in Malawi. In both, black represents the people of the African continent, and green symbolises the land and the encuring evidence of the maintenance of neo-colonialism.



Ronna Innes's outlick on the neighbouring countries of Malawi and Mozambique focuses on the colonisation and exploitation by the British and Portuguese. The subsequent inability to sustain economic growth, as a result of debt, and the attention of indifferent global bankers are also issues that are addressed.

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Paul Wells, in: **Re-Imagining Animation**, a book by Paul Wells and Johnny Hardstaff (UK), including an article about **Flag Metamorphoses**. AVA Publishing SA Lausanne / Thames & Hudson, 2008.

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In both flags, red is concerned with the struggles for liberation from colonial oppressors and is associated with the blood of the martyrs in the cause of freedom. The difference in the intrinsic outlook of the countries is best expressed through the Symbols on the flags, though: Malawi's rising sun suggests the dawn of hope and freedom for the whole of Africa, while Mozambique's rifle, hoe and open book offer a mixed message of a belief in literacy, democracy and working the land, facilitated by militarist defensiveness and authority. The Mozambique flag is the only flag to feature a rifle.

German-based American artist, Barry Roshto, has created a piece called Red and Yellow, which deals with the evolution of the Vietnamese flag and notes: 'One of the most formidable events of my childhood and teenage years in southern USA was a conflict which I had absolutely nothing to do with. It happened in a place that I have never visited, involving a nation of people with which I have had very little contact. But the war in Vietnam, with all of its traumatic effect on US society, is only a brief episode in the ancient and ongoing struggle of the Vietnamese people. This struggle is evident in the evolution of the Vietnamese flag. Although it has taken on diverse form, borrowed symbolic content from colonial powers, and remains a subject of heated debate even today, there is a central thematic thread: red blood and yellow skin.'

Roshto sophisticatedly uses the changing flags that have emerged out of Vietnam's complicity with, and resistance to, colonising influences as the subject and object of his piece. It begins with the original Chinese flag of the late emperors; the flags and related Symbols of the French colonial oppressors; Vietnam's own internal divisions and preferred identities related to the rise of the Viet Minh; and the inevitable shadow of the United States, along with the impact of the Vietnam War.

Myriam Thyes recognised that the key concept of changing cultures was readily revealed through the use of animation's core language of metamorphosis, and in the way animation could reveal and yet challenge the dense meanings embedded in national image Systems: Animation is a wonderful and perfect way to express transformations and recreations. The abstract and graphical language of Flash fits with flags and other Symbols. When working with Flash, I can look at the result immediately and make changes quickly - this resembles drawing, painting or other direct techniques. Some people may think animation doesn't support art because they only know the commercial use of it, but even in the commercial sector, Japanese anime feature films contain a lot of artistic imagination.'

Conceptually, Thyes felt that the best results might be achieved if the metamorphoses themselves took place within a single frame: 'What I have in mind is generally one changing image, not a film with scenes and cuts. I prefer morphs and transformations, a scene that develops by metamorphoses and replacements of objects and shapes, in order to avoid the change of the complete image at once.'

FORMALIST APPROACHES

This use of the formalist limits of the frame, while addressing the conditions of transition and meaning within it, reflects Thyes's background and identity as a Visual artist. The particular influence of Russian constructivism and the work of the Bauhaus movement are reflected in her collage technique and political satire.

Her cinematic influences are also pertinent: 'I like Pedro Almodovar for his photography, his image composition and his use of colours, and, of course, for his deep humour. I also like the experimental and rhythmical films of Maya Deren, and the mixture between video and animation. I admire films such as Antz or Shrek as intelligent entertainment, but visually it is not what I'm looking for when it comes to new experiences in animation. I think there is much more to explore and there are many undiscovered possibilities in animation.'