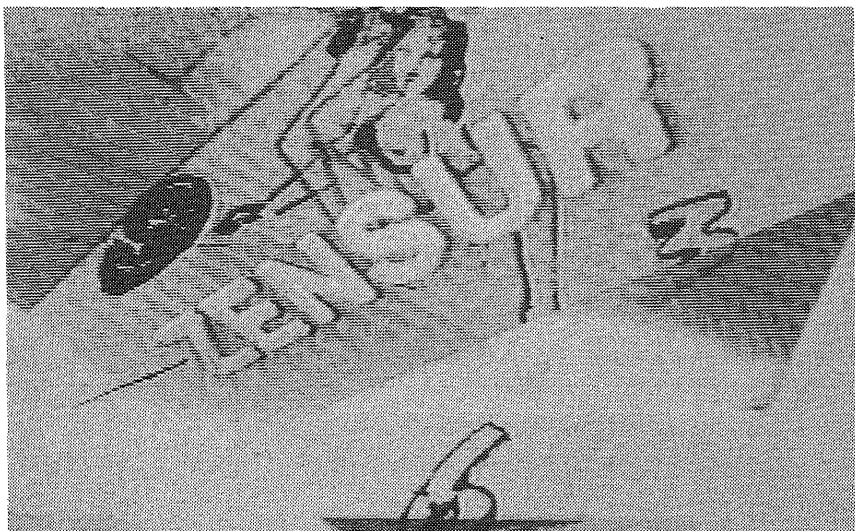


PUBLIC IMAGES AND IMAGES OF POWER

Peter Weibel



Petr Vrána - Medienpormesie

Contrary to public belief, public images are no longer produced by the art world or by individuals. Public images have become the domain of media: print media, street signs, posters, film- and TV-images, covers, billboards, logos, etc. Most of the time public images are media images produced by corporations, agencies, and political institutions. The goal of the public image is propaganda for commodities and ideologies. Therefore public images have not only become the promotional support for commodities and ideologies, but the very structure of commodity and ideology itself. Advertising images have become an essential part of the production process. Advertising a product, which means to establish an exchange value and a need for a product through a campaign of public images, is sometimes more cost-intensive than the production of the product itself. Therefore public images have become a glamorous commodity in themselves.

Images produced by painters rarely enter the public domain at all. Traditional pictures like paintings only invade public space if transformed into media images. Traditional images like paintings have lost their historical quality of being an image at all. They have become pure commodities.

The subversion of the commodity structure of the image is only possible within media images, since media images are the core of public images. Media images by artists can play the art of noise in the music of plutocracy. One of the

strategies of subversion is to acknowledge that the three classical categories of sign have lost their function. We do not live any longer with signs which relate directly to objects in our environment; we don't act any more according to icons, indices, or symbols which relate to objects through visual analogy, physical dependence, arbitrariness, or conventional coding. Since all objects are replaced by commodities, we have a new category of signs which relate to commodities instead of objects. This new class of signs is called logos. We are living in a logo-culture, a substitution for the historical iconographic and symbolic culture. In this logo-culture, the institutions producing the public images, and the products and logos for products, have become the frame of reference. In former times inner experience or visions functioned as the point of departure.

Modern image making therefore deals with the social, institutional and political elements which are constructing the image. In that sense the visual artist can subvert the framing and representation of the image by deconstructing the constitutive elements of the image. Are the social and institutional powers constructing the world and are they using artists as well-paid slaves to represent the world as they have constructed it? One of the few strategies of a powerless class, to which artists belong, is to deconstruct and reconstruct images. Between representation and construction of the world — the classic dichotomy between powerlessness and

(1988) La fermental 7, Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York
r.6-9



Sara Hornbacher - Anti-Scenes in Panama (A Tropical Movie)

power, between art and politics — between scylla and charybdis there is another way: deconstructing and reconstructing. Instead of representation, which is always a form of adaptation, which is always a form of affirmation, the aesthetic system and the social system can be a coupling system for deconstruction and reconstruction. The contemporary artist therefore has to reconstruct and deconstruct above all public images, the images of power, in an effort to remake history, to reinvent the present, and to restock the real. Have the media turned reality into a club — the reality club owned by lawyers, politicians, companies, corporations, the military? The artist and each individual has the chance to reinvent reality through deconstructing media images. Most people experience real life only through media controlled by power. Mediated life is the fate of most people. Mediated life as a substitution for real life has become a private club only for members, the members of the power class. Paintings are a kind of ticket to this club. Media images can turn into dirty tickets, false tickets, and therefore subvert the logic of the membership. Public images are media images. Media images are images of power. Public images are therefore also images of power. To deconstruct power is the true intention of deconstruction: to make the system inconsistent with what is represented in media images.

Instead of an ontology of the image built on the triple relation of object-sign-truth, we need an epistemology of the image built on the triple relation of sign-power-truth. In this new relation

and foundation of artwork we have the chance to uncover the power, to discover the truth by reconstructing, deconstructing, recoding, and decoding the chain of signs, and by redefining the signs. This shift from ontology to epistemology is already announced by the shift from production to post-production typical of the electronic image, the media image. The ontology of the image is based on the myths of old production modes. The epistemology of the image is based on the new modes of production which are post-productive and tele-devised. Local topological production modes are replaced through spatially and temporally diversified post-production modes. This shift from production to post-production, which characterizes fully the transition from the cinematographic image to the electronic image, happened essentially in the seventies, and was naturally experienced in the beginning as a devaluation of the image. Since then any bad image could be saved in post-production, and the constructive elements of the image have become the subjective of the image itself. The most technically constructive elements of the image have become the subject and the content of the image itself.

Through post-production both the availability of the history of the image and the dispossession of the image have become an awareness. The inflation of images has been a second wave, generated by the emphasis on post-production. The first wave, the logical antecedent, was the debunking of the image, the extinction of the historical qualities of image making, which now,



Ardele Lister - Zoe's Car

in a third restorative wave, are again simulated — as a drive, a hunger for the image, in painting as a nostalgia for a lost cause.

The process of image making is historically definitive and finally separated from (local) production and related concepts like ownership, etc. The traditional parameters of time, space, and socialization linked with production are equally transformed by post-productive tendencies. In post-production images tend to show new social, temporal and spatial modes, and utopias of dispossession, etc. Appropriation is the catch-word which tries to describe the productive and social consequences following the shift from production to post-production in image making, repeating the general tendency in economics of the production of products. The discourse of appropriation is therefore not only one of using foreign-found images, image banks, or dispossessing images — which often does not avoid the danger of historicizing the present and neohistoricizing history — which happens in the cases of the new art movements (from neo-expressionism to neogeo). The real appropriation would be to disown, dispossess the apparatus in power — the apparatus of representation as we know it. Dislocation or teleproducing in post-production does not mean distancing history or diachronic approaches but rather distancing the history of power, the history written by power. Dispossession means only to disown power.

Becoming ahistorical and apolitical are the results of a superficial capitalist adaptation of

appropriation as revealed in the neo-movements of art, where rather appropriation, understood as disappropriation, could mean rewriting history, remaking the world by historical and social deconstruction of the constituents of the image, the image making process, the representation mode of the image.

The image in its frame and configuration of representation is suppressing the real. This suppression is linked to a specific function, which comes from the neglected fact that the stable image (e.g. painting) is not the last value, has not its real value in itself. The image needs its support from other values — from history, from social acceptance and from money. The value of money is the real value of the image. Money is the last denominational value. Without this support an image has no value and does not exist. Public images therefore are images which support money, which support this constitution of society, this empire of values, where money is the last value, the founding value. Public images are therefore propaganda images for these values. Public images don't generally tell the truth; they are strategies of seduction, glamorizing commodities. Like money, so also the image, above all the public image, tends to suppress the real.

On this basis we can see that art cannot incorporate the last degree of freedom as it is proclaimed. Just the opposite is true. Free trade and free media have not become free exchange of information, but transformed information into



Axel Klepsch - Augen Zu

an exchange value on the free market. By commodifying information, information itself has become obscured to such a measure that revealing the truth about important social facts and events has become nearly impossible, as we all know. It is a ridiculous lie that there is a free press or that there are free media in any country. The news value of information is not important, but rather its abstract free exchange value.

Everything has become liberated, has been set free — the arts, the media, the signs — at the very moment of history and only under the condition that freedom has no meaning anymore, at least not in its historical meaning. Freedom today means freedom of abstraction, abstraction of anything in to an exchange value, into an abstract free exchange value. Money is an abstract exchange value. It is the telepresence of objects and values. The image as the telepresence of the object repeats this logic of the capital.

This freedom of art representing the abstraction of the free exchange value is another reason why art is not dealing with the real, especially not with the third world which only can be immune to our arts or colonized by our arts. Epidemics are detractors, showing our culture as black holes, as implosion.

Media have become a way to colonize not only other nations but also one's own nation. The empire of colonization, in the sense of colonizing continents and peoples, is finally broken down. Evidence in culture for the vanishing of spatial colonization is the nostalgic discovery of

colonial splendor or misery in the commercial film, the colonial exploitation film. After the breakdown of spatial or racial colonization, the people in power started to colonize their own or foreign countries temporally and mentally. Television is the way to colonize one's own nation. Print and public media mastermind, colonize, exploit, and subordinate one's own nation. The mental colonization of one's own country, this brutal prolongation of a historical mode of exploitation and suppression, is the colonization of desire, of consciousness, of needs and values, of styles and minds, of attitudes and goals. A weak form of protest and opposition, is the contemporary practice of appropriating and deconstructing images of mass media, the media of colonization. Decolonizing media is the task of a contemporary artist. Built on the power of representation, the institutions of power colonize the people with representational images which follow the morphology of desire. After ruining representation, the next step is decolonizing media, reappropriating media images and reclaiming reality. Decolonizing media is a way to deconstruct and destroy the empire of power.