

Kunsthhaus
Graz

English

Faking the Real

The Art of Enticement

Space02, Foyer
22.09.2022–08.01.2023

FAKE IT TILL YOU MAKE IT!

Faking the Real is the title of the Kunsthaus Graz exhibition staged as part of a larger cooperation between six locations, *The Art of Enticement*. To mark its 100-year history, the socio-political role of graphic design is now explored in six shows across the city.

At Kunsthaus Graz, the focus lies on the relationship between art, media images and public communication from 1971 onwards. Building on a retrospective of all of the main steirischer herbst festival posters presented in the foyer, this show traces the interaction between art and graphic design in almost 80 works where the current concept of the *fake* plays a key role. Five themed sections in Space02 visualise the strategies of deception, optimisation, manipulation and appropriation, which inspire and mingle with each other in a rapidly developing technology.

Today, as we speak of a growing sense of insecurity in a FAKED world of media, it makes sense to take a good look at the development of art in public (media) space. Does the beautiful, the true image really exist? Or should we rather always keep in mind the question: how can it be used?

Seeing is believing

The world of images has become infinite. We are constantly confronted with images, both in private and in public. They tell us stories, captivate us, they want to make us believe in things. They want to impress, shock and inform us.

Public images are images of power, says Peter Weibel. His work *TV-News* was broadcast 50 years ago. Despite its absurdity, the television audience did not doubt its truthfulness. Images can advertise consumer goods or ideologies. Images are staged, manipulated, smoothed and clipped. Public images are not just a key part of the news – they are often the news itself. Algorithms send us just the right images selected to draw us further into the digital depths of large global corporations, who can profit from our viewing of images. Wherever our eyes linger, whatever piques our interest, is what we are fed more and more of, constantly.

Signe Pierce says that we move ‘in the dawn of the deep fake’, so describing the extent to which fiction already permeates reality. Deepfake deceives politicians just as it deceives all of us, because the (digitally) perfectly manipulated image is able to create its own realities that we cannot see through at a visual level. We trust our eyes unless the logic of the image or its context becomes flawed. What we have seen with our own eyes is credible reality and EYE SEX – that is the pure pleasure of it.

Be Beautiful!

‘What do pictures want?’ asks W.J.T. Mitchell, traversing the boundary between object and agency. Images can be perceived as offensive, they have the power to insult us. They prompt strong reactions particularly when they appear in public space, touch on social hotspots or break taboos. Elfie Semotan’s pictures for Palmers provoked feminists in 1981 both because of Christian Satek’s slogan ‘Trau dich doch’ – ‘Just do it’ – and due to the objectification of the female body as an attractive appearance – especially for the male viewer. The woman who confidently poses is no longer hiding in a locker as a pin-up girl, but is seen on a large-format billboard in public space. She conforms

to the common beauty ideals of the time. ‘Are you too “fat” for sex?’ asks Silvie Fleury on the 1991 cover of *Playgirl*, where the (well-toned) Man of the Year also touts ‘The Awful Truth about Sensitive Men’. *Kate, Naomi and Christy* appear as boards covered in faux fur, referring to the supermodels of the 1990s – tall, thin, chic, soft and minimalist. The commercialised ‘beauty’ of the predominantly female body is standardised by media images to become a yardstick and hence also a commodity. ORLAN stages her cosmetic surgery as a spectacle. But what is ‘pure beauty’? In 1995, Rosemarie Trockel manipulated models’ faces so that they appeared completely symmetrical in her design for the ‘museum in progress’ association, which was put up across the city of Vienna. The image of the perfect human being was spread as a message in public and media space. Perfected stereotypes are both sinister and magical at the same time – it is only through their exaggeration that the illusion of the mainstream becomes clear. Christiane Peschek has softened her face beyond recognition by applying digital beauty filters.

Follow Me!

Michael Schuster’s empty shopping trolley issues a stark warning against what we might want when we go shopping. The highest asset of capitalism is consumption, whose concentrated visual symbol is the logo. This graphic sign of a company, used as a status symbol, is carved forever into the face in Daniele Buetti’s work. Otto Mittmannsgruber and Martin Strauß, on the other hand, have created *Schokomonolog*, a series of posters featuring chocolate bars with company logos – the sweet enticement of advertising and the ‘eternal desire to consume’. This series is quite simple in its appeal.

Followers are social media subscribers who follow influencers, friends or other serious or unserious broadcasters. The influencers’ mission is to gain attention. Their consumer goods are films and images monetised by individualised advertising. According to Guy Debord, we have long since been living in a ‘society of the spectacle’ that rejects ‘real life’ and follows an illusory world of advertising, clichés and propaganda.

Propaganda, which has become the term for political advertising in particular, is also trying to attract followers. As systematically planned mass communication,

propaganda does not aim to inform, but rather to convince. Central to this is a symbolically charged visual language, which, as in Robert Indiana's 2008 election advertisement *HOPE* for Barak Obama, contracts reality while longing for a new one. Equally concise is the message that Gottfried Bechtold staged as conventional election posters. 'Unser Mann' – 'our man' – is completely interchangeable. The artist Katharina Sieverding captions her portrait of herself surrounded by the threat of knives with a brief and forceful slogan: 'Germany is becoming more German'. In 1992, in reaction to political events following the country's reunification, this work became a large-scale poster campaign that stirred up debate. *The Nazis* are the personification of evil in the work of Piotr Uklański, portrayed by actors in films produced by the global entertainment industry. Overlaying historical images ranging from Warhol's Lenin to Father Christmas, he not only asks whether we can recognise evil, but also shakes up any kind of image worship. The Center for Political Beauty boldly asks: 'Where are our weapons?' and calls on the German people to return the missing objects. Faking the 'real' with the means of art often leads deeper into a 'truth'.

Yes, *We Can*. Self-empowerment and the visualisation of injustices and inequalities are key aspects of an art activism that makes use of the visual language of advertising for the purposes of art. For the Guerrilla Girls, mass-produced printed material serves as the vehicle for their feminist messages: they highlight the male dominance of the exhibition world and ask provocative questions about the role of women in art. In 1970 Judy Chicago depicted herself as a boxer engaged in the fight for equal rights and as an ironic take on male macho behaviour. In 2021, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński showed a triptych with a colour-changing background in black, red and green, the colours of the Pan-African flag, which stands for worldwide recognition of people with African roots. Thomas Hirschhorn assembles a video from found images of war. His fingers are shown zooming in on violent depictions: he touches the surface of the image and takes us into the middle of the horror. The documentary image is touching in its immediacy and can hurt the viewer in its rawness. Dragana Žarevac also works with found footage. She has compiled dance videos from all over the world made following Pharell Williams' *Happy* song in 2013.

The beautiful happy glow does not last. The reality of war, street fights and displacement are mixed in with the positive images until the mood of the video turns.

Alarm!

The publicly affixed image in the local street and the private image of the street for the global, virtual space define the range of the media image. Magazines and newspapers are an important part of its dissemination. Hito Steyerl presents three monochrome red monitors, referring not only to the red alert triggered when there is a terrorist threat, but also the end of the image as proclaimed 100 years ago. In 2011, Maja Vukoje still painted the empty billboard with acrylic on canvas. It is not the image itself that is in danger of disappearing but its truth content, constantly. In the struggle for attention, visual culture is caught in a rapid acceleration between appropriation and reduction. When we look at images, we need a critical eye with regard to truth, attribution and subjective association in order not to succumb to *Augensex*, or 'eye sex' (Gerwald Rockenschaub, 1984) – and pure seduction. There may be moments of common agreement – as in Isabella Kohlhuber's *Space for Agreement* – where recognising the codes is equally

difficult for everyone, and so we come together to speculate, connect and negotiate.

Faking the Real

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Sundays, 2–3 pm in English language

A project for *The Art of Enticement* in
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