

## Street Politics:

A study of the reclamation of visual public space

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We live in a culture of ever-present images. With the advent of photography, images entered the realm of mass production, wherein they could be produced in great quantities for a relatively low cost in a form that was highly mobile. After its invention in France, photography quickly gained popularity as an alternative and affordable method of portraiture for the growing middle classes.<sup>1</sup> As the technology developed further, the photograph became a mainstay of documentation. In his essay on stereoscopic photography, Boston essayist and physician Oliver Wendell Holmes expounded on the potential of photography as a means to depict the world.

*There is only one Coliseum or Pantheon but how many millions of potential negatives have they shed, - representatives of billions of pictures. Matter in Large masses must always be fixed and dear; form is cheap and transportable. We have got the fruit of creation now and need not trouble ourselves with the core.*

Holmes accurately predicted in 1895 that photography would act as the precursor to a society infused with imagery. "Form" as he put it, "is henceforth divorced from matter".<sup>2</sup> As Holmes indicated, images have the ability to surpass physical objects by virtue of their surface quality alone. Simultaneously, while they forsake the burdens of tangible matter, photographs maintain the authority of reality. Lewis Hines, a reformist photographer wrote:

*The photograph has an added realism of it's own; it has an inherent attraction not found in other forms of illustration. For this reason, the average person believes implicitly that the photograph cannot falsify".<sup>3</sup>*

Those who observe photographic images accept them at face value. They are perceived as acting without agenda or bias, providing a strict documentation of a universal reality. In other words, we perceive photographic images as absolute visual truth. Connected with this inherent realism, images, (those of a photographic nature in particular). Are unique in the way they transmit information. Theorist Walter Lippmann noted the power of images to speak to us on a level beyond rationality and complex thought. Our consumption of them is effortless and instantaneous, and we perceive them as unbiased.<sup>4</sup> Lippmann recognizes that images resonate within our minds in a way that circumvents the need for interpretation and translation. They can instantaneously convey an idea that appeals to us in an emotional capacity instead of an intellectual one. The combined qualities of images, including implicit realism, instantaneous ideological transmission and cheap reproducibility have been utilized to their highest degree in one specific form of mainstream media: advertising.

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Ewen, *All Consuming Images* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984) p.39

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereoscope and the Stereograph," *The New Media Reader* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006) p.101

<sup>3</sup> Lewis Hines, "Social Photography" *The New Media Reader* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006) p. 112

<sup>4</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks 1997) p. 61

Modern advertising speaks the language of emotion with an articulacy that is rarely surpassed. In his analysis on advertising culture, media theorist Stephen Duncombe identifies the power of visual advertising. While ads commonly depict unrealistic fantasies and attribute unreasonable properties to the products, which they promote, they leverage these fantasies with sentiments that appeal to our feelings and unconscious impulses.

*They [advertisements] argue their case without rational argument, appealing to us in a deeply visceral and personal way. Advertising speaks to desire, not reason.*<sup>5</sup>

Because advertisements work in the language of emotion but still must retain mass appeal, they rely on the power of images to immediately transmit their narratives while retaining a lasting impact on the viewer. As Holmes stated, images retain their realistic qualities even when all meaningful context is removed from them<sup>6</sup>. Stuart Ewen, in his book *All Consuming Images* also talks about this concept in a more modern context. He observes that “disembodied images are free of the encumbrances posed by material reality,” yet states that they “still lay claim to this reality.” Furthermore, images appeal to exceptional desires in a “visual grammar which...looks real.”<sup>7</sup> Advertisements offer the best of both worlds; they convey our greatest fantasies to us, but through imagery that is indisputably authentic on an emotional level. While our rational minds are often well aware of the capacity of images within advertisements to mislead, our hearts remain susceptible to the seemingly undeniable visual truth that we find at their core.

Few other physical spaces are so completely dominated by advertising as major cities. It is impossible to walk a block in Manhattan without encountering at least one form of visual advertising. Cities themselves are dependent on the visual. Large urban spaces are conglomerates of different cultures and nationalities all of which contribute to the general character of the space itself. Through all of these shifting social flows, people live and work. An individual within a city is constantly coming into contact with the foreign. The majority of people encountered are strangers; this quality of strangeness is reflected back on the individual. Anonymity becomes associated with a person’s sense of self and understanding of one’s environment is generally garnered from brief visual encounters. Because people in cities rely on visual judgment on a daily basis, they are highly susceptible to the visual cues of the advertisements, which saturate the surfaces of their surroundings. These surfaces silently but persistently urge us buy the newest pair of Nike sneakers or watch the latest season of a reality TV show. Then overnight, they are gone, replaced by a different advertisement compelling us along a different road of consumption for a different set of products. One of the greatest forms of waste filling our landfills today is generated from product packaging.<sup>8</sup> The advertising, which coats our cities, acts as a packaging on a much larger scale. A recent article in the *New York Times* stated that advertising in general is declining with one key exception: storefront advertisements. While formerly viewed as an undesirable space, storefront ad sales are now increasing due to

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Duncombe, *Dream* (New York: The New Press, 2007) p. 79

<sup>6</sup> Holmes, p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> Ewen, p. 90

<sup>8</sup> Ewen p. 72, 241

the comparably cheap costs. The space for these ads is also growing, as more and more stores are being vacated as a result of the flagging economy. In addition, the structures of the advertisements themselves are changing. The companies that manufacture the signs are now designing ads that extend beyond the windows of the storefront. Inwindow [a signage company] has also changed the storefront ads so they are more than just posters hanging inside a store. It now designs custom vinyl coverings that adhere to a store's brick and glass and are cut to fit over doors, ledges and other architectural elements.<sup>9</sup>

The packaging of our buildings hints at the greater aims of the advertisements themselves. These surfaces promote increasingly disposable goods and are conveniently disposable themselves. The surface of a city is invariably in a state of flux, however this flux is increasingly being moderated by private interest. In the name of profit, these private and corporate controllers advocate a message of disposability linking the process of using with the act of using up.<sup>10</sup> It has been established that the visual serves as a point of reference for those residing in a city. If this reference is saturated with the concept of consumption without limit, what defense do we have against internalizing this limitless consumption at a massive scale? How can we combat this visual infiltration?

On the morning Saturday, April 25<sup>th</sup> several teams of individuals armed with white paint and rollers traversed Manhattan and sections of Brooklyn in vans. By 3:00 they had whitewashed approximately 130 billboards around the city. Prior to this, these locations held illegal advertisements and billboards placed there without permits and in violation of advertising regulations as articulated by the New York City Department of Buildings. After the whitewashers had completed their work, over 50 New York artists descended on the spaces and put up their work in place of the advertisements. By the end of the day, the spaces had been filled with original artwork. The project was coordinated and organized by artist and activist Jordan Seiler of publicadcampaign.com, who targeted street level illegal street level advertisements. The concept of the project was elegantly simple. Instead of allowing these spaces to be illegally used by corporate and private interests they were temporarily converted to use by the public. The works of art that replaced the advertisements served as a literal act of protest against the domination of public visual space by marketing material and as a symbolic gesture of the potential these areas have to act as spaces that promote creative expression and community engagement.

The majority of the advertisements were placed by a company called NPA City Outdoor whose business practice is centered on the promotion and installation of large-scale illegal advertising or what they have termed "Wildposting" across major metropolitan areas like New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. Text on their website reads:

*Wildposting outdoor advertising programs, our primary service, are displays of poster advertisements on construction fences, scaffolding units and eye-level bulletins. This medium provides clients with the opportunity to display multiple images in highly trafficked locations throughout major metropolitan areas. A traditional citywide campaign gives*

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<sup>9</sup> Stephanie Clifford, "As Storefronts become Vacant, Ads Arrive," New York Times, May 11, 2009

<sup>10</sup> Ewen p. 237

*advertisers an opportunity for extensive reach and frequency. By using eye-level exposure with the multitude of poster sizes and showing levels (standard, double, and triple) your message will come through loud and clear.<sup>11</sup>*

Outdoor advertising is regulated by the Department of Buildings for several reasons: to prevent billboards from being erected in an unsafe fashion, to regulate advertising to specific districts and to prevent persuasive messages from being placed anywhere and everywhere a corporation can buy space<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the department specifically states that it is illegal to post any advertisement on sidewalk sheds, scaffolding or construction fences anywhere in the city due to the designation of these spaces as public places.<sup>13</sup> Despite the clear infractions of companies like NPA City Outdoor, prosecuting them through official means is generally ineffective. The buildings department has 15 employees in its special operations program qualified to review illegal billboard complaints. The Department received 921 illegal billboard complaints from across the city last year. In addition, there are efforts being made to de-regulate the placement of ads in public spaces. Private supporters of this deregulation such as Andrew Montana, owner of Service Signs Erector Company, criticize any objections to deregulation as harmful to the economy in a time of crisis.<sup>14</sup> On top of these administrative barriers to removing these illegal ads, there exists a subconscious public acceptance of the artificial right of advertisers to public attention and space. I teach a discussion course at Hunter College in media studies. When I posed the question of illegal mainstream advertising to my students, I was confronted with cynicism and tolerance. As one of my students said “advertisers need to sell their products, so they will do whatever it takes to make sure people know that [these products] exist.” Her words surprised me at the time because they contained an implicit acceptance of advertising as an unavoidable fact of life. When this attitude is evaluated within the framework of a culture dominated by visual ad-space however, it is perhaps naive to assume that many people would consider an alternative to an urban life dominated by ad space. If this is an accurate assessment of the status of street level advertising, it’s clear that conventional tactics are ineffective in addressing this issue.

Advertising reinforces the idea of the before and after. The problem, or before as presented by advertising, is a personal deficiency on the part of the individual. The product being sold serves as the solution<sup>15</sup> Duncombe relates this process in advertising to the promise of transformation:

*The mise-en-scene of advertisements- the tropical islands and hip clubs, the efficient fast food drive throughs and zoos where no money changes hands- have meaning only as a transformation of places we are all too familiar with: cold streets, nights in front of the TV, wretched restaurants and privatized public spaces. This is the utopian promise of*

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<sup>11</sup> Traditional Wildposting, NPA City Outdoor, <http://www.npacityoutdoor.com/mainframe.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Steve Lambert, NYT: Reporting a Crime as a Business Opportunity, Anti Ad Agency, <http://antiadvertisingagency.com/news/nyt-reporting-on-crime-as-a-business-opportunity> (May 12, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Advertising Signs on Sidewalk Sheds, Scaffolds and Construction Fences, NYC Buildings Department [http://www.nyc.gov/html/dob/html/guides/advertising\\_signs.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dob/html/guides/advertising_signs.shtml), (2009)

<sup>14</sup> Marcella Veneziale, Ad Threat Seen For Historic Areas, NY City News Service, (April 21<sup>st</sup> 2009)

<sup>15</sup> Ewen p.74

*advertising: somewhere out there is a world far superior to the one we inhabit, where the person we'd like to become resides.*<sup>16</sup>

This promise of transformation through material acquisition is what makes advertising seem absurd, but also allows it to appear obtainable. We want to believe ourselves capable of self-improvement, and the advertising offers evidence of this improvement through the imagery it uses. We are shown the visual truth of the after and then informed on how to acquire it. Frustration results when the promise of transformation is not delivered, and it is sought elsewhere, often in the form of another product.

While marketers have exploited the concept of transformation, self-improvement is also something that also resides within the core goal of most progressive movements. Street art as practiced by many of the artists of New York is in itself a progressive act. Some criticize street artists for utilizing the same techniques the advertisers they are working against and view the act of street art as one of arrogance rather than progressivism. This perspective fails to recognize the key differences in how street art functions. Street art can rely on the same techniques and convey the same promise of transformation that advertising does with one key difference; the transformation it idealizes and the results it achieves are one in the same- the reclamation of public visual space. Although this reclamation is often temporary, it is more legitimate than any promise made by advertising. There is no rational connection between the purchase of material items and the benefits implied by their corresponding advertisements, which include, but are not limited to: sexual gratification, successful relationships and self actualization. A can of coke will not “open happiness” as the tagline on their website suggests. The mere existence of a piece of street art however, delivers on its thematic promise. It is a reclaiming of public visual space performed by a native individual from the community in which it has been placed. Every time an artist puts their work out there, they prove the potential of the street to serve as a place for individual expression, and as anyone who lives in New York knows, artists are making their marks quite frequently. Beyond this practical level, a piece of street art when properly executed can also utilize the emotionally persuasive power so often found in advertising, but in a far more meaningful fashion. The established street artist Swoon talks about how in Berlin at her very first show, a young girl grabbed her hand and said to her, “Listen, you changed my life”. Six months later Swoon returned to Berlin and discovered that the same girl had converted one of the city’s bus shelters into “one of her favorite works of art ever”.<sup>17</sup> Street art goes beyond the monopoly of the gallery but retains the symbolic power of a work of art. It is both accessible and inspirational; an act of spectacle that reminds the viewer of their collective right to the space they inhabit.

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<sup>16</sup> Duncombe p.80

<sup>17</sup> Swoon, Foreword, *Graffiti Women*, (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd 2006) p. 9

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