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Contemporary Art and Second-Order Advertisement

By Philipp Kleinmichel

In recent years a new generation of artists have shown a growing interest in advertisement, fashion and media. This interest is certainly not new. Quite to the contrary, popular aesthetics and commercial seduction techniques have long been analyzed and evaluated by earlier generations. Hence, one might wonder what it is that motivates artists to return to such a common, well-discussed and analyzed topic? The answer seems obvious: The cultural situation of Western societies - moral self-evidence has changed and along with it the role of the images and forms that play with desire and the erotic attraction of commodities. This functional change has mainly come as a response to the globalized lifestyle of a new generation of sophisticated middle class consumers in the West.

As educated and ethically-conscious consumers, this new generation is no longer fooled by manipulative and seductive marketing techniques. The new consumer type of the digital age always already knows and consciously anticipates the tricks of advertising agencies, and moreover has developed a general critical awareness that determines their ethical and moral engagement with the contemporary world. It is on the basis of this critical and moral consciousness that this new consumer type also manages to immunize themselves successfully against the explicit and subliminal stimuli of fashion and advertising.

However, from this new critically conscious perspective, even the content of the seductive messages in this medial play has become morally problematic. The content - the advertised material goods - appear as expressions of ongoing commercial globalization, of free trade and post-Fordist replacement of production that the critically conscious consumer can easily connect to new forms of exploitation, to climate change and current imperialist wars over resources. Thus, in accordance to the role of the consumer, the situation of advertisement and media has radically changed. The executives of the advertising industry now need to anticipate a consumer aware of his or her own unbearable complicity in the exploitation of the

world and it is, paradoxically, this new consciousness about one's own guilty involvement that helps to affirm the prevailing power structure of the globalized world. Due to its own social and moral milieu, the critical conscious Western middle class is situated namely in an inescapable moral drama of complicity, and it seems as if advertising and digital media would show this globalized generation a possible way out.

The critical consumer is no longer affected and convinced by the subliminal messages of marketing, instead they seem to be able to sharpen their own ability to analyze and reflect the desire-producing techniques and strategies and their socio-political context. Such critical reflective consumption has morally elevating effects and by morally elevating themselves, critical consumers, in other words, can enjoy themselves and their own critical and prudent judgement - even more so if they make it public, by sharing this ability and insight on digital platforms like Facebook. Only from such a morally elevated position does it become possible to bear one's own complicity and participation with a total system that by one's own ethical standards and values has become unbearable. And insofar as the media executives are not only producers of seductive images and forms, but belong more or less to the same social milieu, media and advertisement increasingly function as the obscene and narcissistic social play that can only be reflected from a relative autonomous outside. This autonomous outside is the art world, in which a new generation of artists, who certainly belong to the same milieu, are starting to begin to aesthetically analyze the powerful and mythical attraction of this fateful narcissistic complex.