

## Avant-Sell Out

### -The New Public and the Use of Avant-Garde Means in the Advertising Industry.

*Anders Olling.*

”The revolution in art, the search after new means and ways, the whole movement that in the last decade has been called futurism, has also been attempted neutralized and its clean, direct effectiveness weakened”.

The art designed for mass consumption, has assured its immunity by using a small dose of the artistic means of the new art.”<sup>i</sup>

- Sergej Trejakov, 1923.

When reading the quote above one sees that recuperation, or the market's absorption of the means of the avant-garde art, is nothing new. In fact the new ideas of the avant garde seem, as Kristian Møller Smith in this chapter's first paper, to contribute to that dynamic which capitalist society is actually deadly dependent on. Yet the use of alternative means in the advertisement business do not seem to interest people at the art institutes at the universities (at least not in Copenhagen). Maybe we find it a bit of a dirty business that can not contribute to our identity as culturally superior art historians, cultural studies-peoples and so forth. Yet it is an important issue to take a closer look at, because advertisement seems in these years to be in a period of transition, leaving the traditional billboards and ads for a further integration of, not art and everyday life, but *ads* and everyday life. Ads intervene in our lives in new ways, they become a part of the common news flow, and it is this development I want to examine in this paper.

#### *The Public Sphere and the Lost Halo of Journalism*

The broader public sphere has changed in the last decade since the arrival of the Internet and 24-hour news broadcasting in the majority of homes. The whole media spectrum seems to have changed into something new and the consequences are hard to grasp. But one thing is clear: It is hard to see journalists as what we, at least in Denmark, sometimes refer to as ”the servants of truth.” Journalists are busier than ever, there is a constant demand for breaking news, and they rarely have time for a thorough critic of their sources. Established media in democratic debate such as the newspaper are in a state crisis. The new viral media, the democratization of publishing and a public that seems more interested in personal stories or scandals have made it clear, that we find ourselves in a new era of public communication with potentials and risks. In fact I would even say that we find ourselves in an era similar to the thirties in which the great public for the first time was confronted with mass media such as radio and cinema. As Walter Benjamin put it in ”The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (written throughout the nineteen-thirties), this had an

enormous potential, but in fact it was the Nazis who ended up making the most efficient use of the mass media in their propaganda. Not to say that we will end up being misled by a new Nazi regime, but we find ourselves in a time in which the public needs to learn how to act critically in a new media landscape.

While things have changed, more and more agents in society have become dependent on public attention and that attention can be reached by taking advantage of the public's desire for scandals and journalists' lack of time.

### *Breaking the Contract – Alternative Communication and Advertisement.*

In an everyday life with a constant news flow, it can be hard to break through with a message. It is speculated that traditional advertisement, such as TV-ads, ads in newspapers, magazines and on billboards, seems to have lost its effect on at least some parts of the public. But by using creative means, advertisers can get a whole new kind of attention. And here it is interesting for advertisers to take a look at the so-called subversive or avant-garde art movement. New ideas of advertising pops up many places. Volkswagen opens a hotel in Copenhagen named after its car called FOX and pays a number of artists to decorate the place. The aim of course, is to add a little artistic coolness to the car company's brand. Nike acquires empty spaces in Berlin and makes football fields filled with the Nike logo, the Swoosh, to get its name implemented in the urban space – and in order to gain some street credibility.

But my focus is on how companies are getting attention through hoaxes and scandals, which bring on public attention in different ways. I think a mapping of this subject would be of great importance in order to understand how contemporary media work in the public, and sometimes I even think that advertisers' interventions in public life are more interesting than the works of artists.

This paper cannot map this whole tendency, but I can present three quick examples of alternative communication, which in very efficient ways make use of the avant garde's methods to address the public and get its attention.

#### *Example 1. B41/Luux: Publicity Through Lies.*

The Copenhagen night club Luux launched in the summer of 2009 a press release and uploaded a video on YouTube. The press release stated that the bar had been vandalised by unknown activists that had covered the interior of the night club with a graffiti tag saying "B41." Who was this mysterious unknown graffiti crew? The YouTube video was apparently uploaded by the vandals showing them doing the job on Luux. Danish newspaper *Politiken* took up the story and wrote an article with the title "Vandalised night club and put video on Youtube"<sup>ii</sup>. Half-way through the article the journalist speculated whether the story was a publicity stunt from Luux, but still bought

the idea of vandalism. A week later Simon Valentin, the owner of Luux, put out a new press release, admitting that the story was a hoax, and that the night club was to reopen by the end of the summer under a new name: B41. *Politiken* had to put out a new article about the hoax and B41 and Valentin got even more attention. Lots of attention to Simon Valentin and B41: A well-made publicity stunt.

For Valentin timing is everything: At that time Copenhagen had just experienced a huge scandal because of an activist takeover of the street Hyskenstræde, which had been covered with graffiti up to the third floor. So at the time the manager of Luux/B41 released the information to the public, the indignation towards graffiti activism was at a climax. Also, it was summer, which at least in Denmark is a period when media have few substantial things to cover. It's called the "cucumber time," and in that period it is easier to get through to the public with help from the media.<sup>iii</sup> So Luux or B41 takes advantage of two things: A time of indignation towards graffiti and lack of important stuff to write about, and that offers a chance to get a lot attention through alternative means.

What does that have to do with avant-garde art? First of all there is a tradition of the newer avant garde to "break the contract" just as Simon Valentin does in this case. The Danish interventionistic theater group Solvognen in the seventies put people in situations in which they in fact participated in fictions, but in real life.<sup>iv</sup> In this case the public is tricked to participate in a fictive narrative about a nightclub being ruined by graffiti activists. But in the end the message of the narrative is narrowed down to one thing: We are opening a new night club.

Earlier, in the sixties, the anarcho-situationistic group Black Mask (who later changed the group's name to Up against the wall, Motherfucker) also made a really radical sort of institutional critique by putting out fake press releases saying that a gallery handed out free beer the same evening. That created chaotic situations where hundreds of people demanded beer from the gallery in which people did not understand what was going on.

By faking it, Simon Valentin and his product become a part of the common news flow. By "breaking the contract" with the media, or simply lying, Valentin orchestrates a happening that uses the cracks in journalism to get attention towards Luux and B41.

### *Example 2: De Grote Donorshow – The Hoax as Alternative Communication Strategy.*

In fact, the following case is not really an ad, but more a kind of infomercial<sup>v</sup>, but I have chosen to include it, because it demonstrates an effective way of controlling and manipulating media in order to get a message through. This case is much bigger than the previous one and took advantage of a whole television network.

The television station BNN in the Netherlands, home of the "Big Brother" reality show, announced

a new reality show: "De Grote Donorshow," the big donorshow. A woman suffering from an incurable brain tumor gets to choose between different people who need a new kidney. A traditional reality show, but with more at stake. The Dutch public goes crazy and a big debate is launched. A member of the parliament tries to censor the show and the prime minister expresses his concerns for the show's damage to the Dutch reputation around the world. But by the end of the first show, the woman with the brain tumor is revealed as a healthy actress and the viewers are informed that the set up was a hoax. But one thing was true: The three persons who were supposed to compete for her kidneys really needed them.

The show had an immediate impact: Two days after the show it was announced that 50,000 people had requested a donor form to be sent to them and in July, a month after the show aired, 7,300 new donors were registered by the Dutch donor registration. Imagine if BNN had made a traditional infomercial on television. It probably would not have changed a thing. To stage the message as a hoax was a very effective way of putting the shortage of organ donation on the political agenda and out in the public.

Again we see how the hoax can be used to catch the public eye and (in this case) bring attention to a relevant and edifying political issue. This has some similarities with the hoaxes made by the interventionistic artist group the Yes Men, but in this case we are talking about a whole television network tricking the public.

*Example 3: Golden Palace.com – Intervention, Integration, and Scandals.*

I have demonstrated two examples of hoaxes – one on a small level and one that stirred up the whole Dutch public. The last one is more extreme. It is a short presentation of the methods used by the Canadian online casino Golden Palace.com to get public attention. In general one can say that the company uses the attention of the scandal. Golden Palace is one of those companies for whom any publicity is good publicity. They advertise in many different and bizarre ways: The company has paid a lot of money to have a recently discovered monkey named after Golden Palace.com. They paid 190.000 euros for the Pope's old Volkswagen Golf. Why would they do that? The answer: 8.5 million watched the auction, the most viewed auction ever on E-bay. Furthermore, Golden Palace.com have paid professional boxers for carrying temporary tattoos on their backs and they paid the professional stalker Mark Roberts for having their name painted on his body when he made an intervention during the 2004 Super Bowl (the national American-football final) in Houston, Texas (the intervention was, by the way, a total failure, because just before Roberts' entry, popstar Janet Jackson had shown her bosom in front of the rolling cameras in her scandalous Super Bowl performance with Justin Timberlake, so nobody cared about the stalker. Timing is everything).

The bizarre marketing methods reached new heights in 2005, when Goldenpalace.com paid the 30-year-old American Kari Smith 10,000 dollars to have Goldenpalace.com tattooed on her forehead. Her face became a permanent ad for the company. Here we see the total integration between body and product. Scandal-seeking media love this, and every time Goldenpalace.com launches one of these publicity stunts, the public throws themselves on the story. In Denmark the alcoholic beverage company Cult Shaker is very succesful in making similar campaigns that provoke the public.

### *Mapping Alternative Advertisement.*

I have presented three cases that in different ways demonstrate how alternative communication has left the sphere of art or activism. Advertisement has changed and the avant-garde advertisement people are very succesful in advertising in new ways. It seems as if the advertisement industry is very good at taking advantage of busy journalists, a public longing for scandals and a new media landscape with the Internet and its influence on the way we participate in the public sphere. In this new situation there are still many things that the public needs to learn. In the thirties we saw how the Nazi propaganda misled the German public, and we heard Orson Wells teaching the American public a lesson about the news broadcast through his radio version of "War of the Worlds" (1938). We still need some experience in the current situation. Before we get a critical attitude towards the new ways of communicating with the public, there are both risks and potentials to consider. Before the public learns to navigate in the new media spectrum, the citizens are vulnerable to hoaxes, spin and scandals put out by the public's different agents. The ones who are able to see through these situations will, on the other hand, find themselves as puppeteers controlling the public.

### **Literature:**

Benjamin, Walter: *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Penguin Books Ltd, 2008.

Borries, Friedrich von: *Who's Afraid of Niketown? Nike Urbanism, Branding, and the City of Tomorrow*, Episode Publishers, Rotterdam, 2004.

Trejakov, Sergej: "LEF og NEP", in: *Ordet er blevet til handling. Skrifter om kunst og revolution 1923-34*, Tiderne Skifter, 1974.

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i This is my own English translation from a Danish translation from: "LEF og NEP," Sergej Trejakov, in: *Ordet er blevet til handling. Skrifter om kunst og revolution 1923-34*, Tiderne Skifter, 1974.

ii Beim, Jakob Vide: Smadrede natklub og lagde video på YouTube, Politiken, 1.7.2009.

iii In English: "Silly season." The Danish-Norwegian term apparently comes from the German "Sauregurkenzeit" when greengrocers during the summer pickled the vegetables because everyone was out of town and they didn't want them to rot. In Germany the term "Sommerloch" is more commonly used today.

iv An example is "Julemandshæren" (1974), the Santa Claus Army where a group of 70 dressed up as Santa Claus did a series of good deeds, including handing out Christmas presents to children in a prestigious department store in Copenhagen. The presents had not been paid for and the Santas were arrested and the gifts taken away from the children.

v Here I use the term in the meaning of non-commercial information to the citizens about society (for example government warnings about a pandemic) and not in terms of commercial teleshopping.