

**20 JAHRE**

# **TEXTE ZUR KUNST**

Dezember 2010 20. Jahrgang Heft 80

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room contains a version of Smithson's 1969 article "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan", redesigned and rearranged by Pisano on the gallery wall – emphasizing the voices of the Mayan and Aztec gods that interpellate Smithson. Yucatan is elsewhere: displacement is the central notion of this presentation, and in front of the rearranged Smithson one encounters six low and lengthy, frieze-like blackboards, all perched on the floor at an acute angle as if to evoke some of Smithson's mirror displacements.

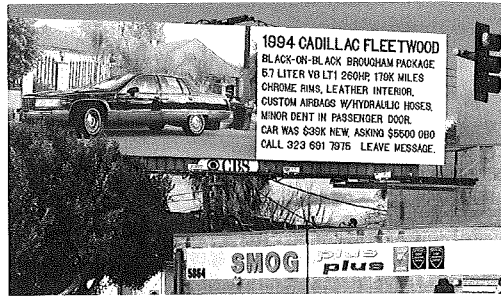
If Smithson's mirror displacements shatter the consistency of the site, Pisano's displaced blackboards introduce certain materials into the gallery nonsite: most are empty, but three boards contain some notes on the Ancient physician Galen, on World War I soldiers suffering from "shell shock" and on Oiticica's colleague Lygia Clark and her transition from working in the art world to a therapeutic context. The boards thus emphasize the body as site – site of symptomatic eruptions and therapeutic interventions, acting and enacted upon, an I-machine of uncertain agency. The piece seems more confidently fragmentary than either the Extra City exhibition or the book. Instead of attempting to dissolve everything into a discourse of uncertain discursivity, it offers resistance to the gaze. As open and improvised as it looks, it has an obdurate quality. Challenging but also limiting the "engaging spectator" with its obdurate thingness, frustrating an all too easy transmutation of objecthood into discourse, such a work might turn into a conversation.

SVEN LÜTTICKEN

Falke Pisano, "(Conditions of Agency)", Extra City, Antwerp, October 17–31, 2010.

## FOREST OF SIGNS

On "How Many Billboards? Art In Stead" in the city of Los Angeles



Drive-by art: during a two-month period earlier this year, twenty-one notable Californian artists put their work on several advertising billboards in central Los Angeles. The panels, designed by Kenneth Anger, Yvonne Rainer, Martha Rosler, and others, vied with actual advertising imagery for the attention of drivers.

Only a notice in small print indicated that these billboards were art at all, something many beholders missed – promptly provoking instances of misunderstanding and generating surprising insights into the effects of art in the public space.

What are the possibilities for public discourse and political statement in an urban environment dominated by corporate speech and spectacle culture? The recent exhibition of artists' billboards organized by the MAK Center in Los Angeles, "How Many Billboards? Art In Stead", offered a strange real-life testing ground for different models of politicized art practice as these attempted to intervene in the public sphere.

As a site for artistic practice, the billboard is a complex form, intersecting discourses of site and urban space with semiotic analyses of the sign. As a commercial practice, it is a multiple that is also singular, a mass-produced sign whose specific locations render each manifestation unique. And, while other outdoor public media, such as subway placards, bus shelters and street posters, primarily address pedestrians, billboards address

people in cars – a distracted and mobile condition of spectatorship that media theorists diagnosed as the “virtual mobile gaze” of late-20th century postmodern life.<sup>1</sup>

Artists’ billboards and artists’ interventions on billboards have a rich history, from Joseph Kosuth’s anonymous ads in public media to the early 1990s projects of Gran Fury and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, among countless others.<sup>2</sup> If such projects were once motivated by utopian desires to move “out of the gallery, into the street”, to address wider publics beyond the highly-regulated confines of the art system, the present-day sphere of “outdoor advertising”, dominated in the United States by major corporate players like CBS, Clear Channel and Van Wagner, offers a more complicated and potentially treacherous landscape.

In spring 2010, working in collaboration with local outdoor advertising companies, MAK presented 21 newly commissioned billboards by mostly California-based artists on major thoroughfares throughout central areas of Los Angeles.<sup>3</sup> The lineup ranged from first-generation conceptual artists – Michael Asher, John Knight, Martha Rosler, Allen Ruppersberg, and Allan Sekula – to diverse younger figures like Renee Green, Brandon Lattu, Daniel Joseph Martinez, and Kori Newkirk.

Long in preparation, “How Many Billboards?” took place in the wake of smaller-scale public art projects by West of Rome, LAX Art, and the LA-based sneaker store Undeclared, among others.<sup>4</sup> It was facilitated by the economic downturn, which left local outdoor advertising companies with significant amounts of unrented billboard space, a rare opening in an enormously profitable industry. In addition, the donation of dozens of centrally located billboards – prime ad space potentially worth of hundreds of thousands of dollars – offered good PR to an industry that has been under attack for causing urban blight, blanketing Los Angeles with illegal and unpermitted

billboards and other signage. As it happens, the exhibition coincided with an escalation of the “billboard wars”, with the arrest of Hollywood property owners who installed multi-story supergraphics on their buildings just before the Academy Awards.

Los Angeles, of course, is a city famously dominated by cars and billboards. In a decentralized urban landscape that evacuates what we usually think of as “public space”, outdoor display forms like billboards, signage and even graffiti in effect represent a different kind of public space – albeit mostly commercialized, controlled and with few avenues for interaction or dissent. How might art address this drive-by culture of distracted attention? And how does one intervene in such a system?

For the MAK exhibition, since billboard locations were selected by the companies as spaces became available, artists had no way of selecting specific sites or targeting particular communities. Hence, any notion of a “site-specific” practice had to be targeted to outdoor advertising itself as a system. In addition, the firms were free to reject proposals that might be deemed too controversial. As a result, some projects had some difficulty finding sites that would accept them. For instance, media artist Lauren Woods’ sparse black and white billboard, featuring two lines from an Urdu love poem, encountered resistance because the Arabic script evidently provoked associations of terrorism for some viewers. In the end, it found a home behind a Bank of America in the Fairfax district, a neighborhood historically a center of the city’s Jewish community. Others, like those of Asher and Sekula, were moved during the exhibition, apparently displaced by paying customers.

For artists, billboards operate in an art historical territory between the strategies Pop and conceptual art, and offer access to a vast potential audience. Some artists used Pop strategies of mimicking and appropriating the codes and



conventions of commercial media – like Kenneth Anger, whose sign spelled out the word “ASTONISH” in all caps in bold neon orange. Adorned by his signature – the only instance in which an artist’s name appeared on their project – Anger’s billboard not only referenced Hollywood glamour, but functioned like an advertisement for Anger himself. Martha Rosler and Josh Neufeld’s far more visually prosaic “Lesson for Today” adopted classic agitprop means, inserting a different message into an existing format, its crude (and perhaps deliberately ugly) graphics reading “Our Future? Seismic Shift – CALIFORNIA IS #1 IN PRISON SPENDING, #48 IN EDUCATION ... Save our higher education system – for California and our kids!” A worthy message, to be sure, though one that perhaps illustrated the difficulties of engaging pressing political issues in the drive-by culture of public media.

Working out of a vein of institutional critique that proposes to take the art system as its subject of investigation, John Knight donated his billboard to the nonprofit Middle-East Children’s Alliance, whose chosen message that “from LA to Palestine, Clean, Drinkable Water is a Human Right” was placed on the Sunset strip next to Gucci ads and promotions for coming television programs. Although framed by the curators as a gesture of self-critique – suggesting the exhibition “serves the same economy of meaning that leaves art aloof from politics and without any real ability to affect change on a structural level”<sup>5</sup> – encountering the display on Sunset Boulevard, one was struck by how a political or humanitarian program could be sold by the same means as a Kirstie Alley reality TV program – and perhaps as ineffectively.

What such laudable efforts to insert meaningful messages into billboard spaces lacked, of course, was insertion in the larger systems – the extraordinarily expensive and highly choreographed advertising and PR campaigns – that

allow corporate messages to hit their targets at least some of the time. Advertising works, and perhaps no structural reasons prevent certain types of meaningful public issues from being addressed in the reductive, ephemeral and spectacularized language systems used to promote meaningless entertainment. Witness, for instance, the quite effective anti-smoking campaigns recently launched by New York City, which cannily employ graphic images and shock tactics to overcome viewers’ resistance. But amidst our highly capitalized “forest of signs”, messages like those of Knight and Rosler and Neufeld lack traction. Is it that artists’ lack the more nuanced understandings of public media that advertising professionals so artfully employ, or is it simply that they lack the ad budgets?

Brandon Lattu’s “Fleetwood Billboard” addressed the structural disparity between individual speech and corporate media in a deadpan manner. Fortuitously located above a car repair shop at Pico and Fairfax, Lattu’s billboard offered a 1994 Cadillac Fleetwood for sale, in effect situating an individual commercial message (of the type one would find on Craigslist or other low-budget listings) in a site reserved for high-end corporate speech. The disparity was apparently not lost on viewers. On a MAK Center panel, Lattu read from some of the perplexed, incredulous and even angry messages left by those who called the phone number included on the sign, incensed at advertising a \$5,500 car (which was actually for sale) on ad space worth far more.

For many viewers encountering the billboards as they drove or walked by, their status as art projects likely went unnoticed, despite the fine print in the lower left corner reading “info at [www.makcenter.org](http://www.makcenter.org)”. Indeed, this ambiguity – over who was sending these messages, and why – heightened the signs’ effectiveness. While overtly politicized messages, like those of Daniel Joseph Martinez and Allan Sekula, often fell flat,

the blanker visual fields of Kori Newkirk, Kerry Tribe and James Welling held up surprisingly well amidst the urban barrage. Newkirk's evocative white field, with a black man whose mouth has been whited-out by an enormous snowball, was soon tagged by graffiti – but the artist understood this gesture as dialogic, not destructive. Tribe's language-free scene of clouds gathering before a storm evoked 19th century German romanticism and Félix González-Torres's 1991 "Untitled (Bed)" billboard, while aligning itself with those who protest outdoor signage as "visual pollution". Sited on a freeway onramp next to a Chevron station, on one of those abandoned interstitial spaces characteristic of the LA landscape, the sharp graphic forms of Welling's abstract photogram took on all sorts of unexpected associations, from graffiti to telephone wires. That such nearly blank signs might provide among the more effective interventions was a surprising lesson indeed.

LIZ KOTZ

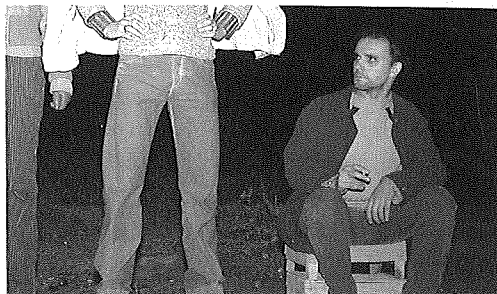
"How Many Billboards? Art In Stead", MAK Center for Art + Architecture, Los Angeles, February 8–June 30, 2010.

#### Notes

- 1 Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Post-modern*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993.
- 2 For a partial history, see Laura Stewart Heon/Joseph Thompson/Peggy Diggs, *Billboard Art on the Road: A Retrospective Exhibition of Artists' Billboards of the Last 30 Years*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press/Mass MoCA, 1999.
- 3 The MAK Center is the idiosyncratic Los Angeles outpost of the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts; since 1994 it has been housed the 1922 Rudolph Schindler Kings Road House, an icon of modernist architecture and a symbol of the early days of modernism in Southern California. The exhibition was co-curated by MAK Director Kimberli Meyer with Lisa Henry, Nizan Shaked and Gloria Sutton. An accompanying catalogue, "How Many Billboards? Art in Stead", ed. by Peter Noever/Kimberli Meyers, West Hollywood, Cal.: MAK Center, 2010, was published shortly after it closed.
- 4 See "Signs and Symbols: Julia Bryan-Wilson on billboard projects in Los Angeles", *Artforum*, October 2008, pp. 165–168.
- 5 From the description by Nizan Shaked at [www.howmanybillboards.org/john-knight.html](http://www.howmanybillboards.org/john-knight.html).

## FORWARD, NOT FORGETTING

On Chto Delat? at the  
Institute of Contemporary Arts, London



The Russian artists' group Chto Delat?/ What is to be done? aims to provide a platform for the fusion of political theory, art, and activism. Founded in Saint Petersburg in 2003, the association sees itself as continuing the tradition of the arts councils set up after the October Revolution. Accordingly, self-organization, collective action, and solidarity are guiding principles of Chto Delat?'s work.

After its appearance at the most recent Istanbul Biennial, Chto Delat? showed a series of videos at London's ICA this fall. Like many of the group's works, these videos subjected the vocabulary of leftist aesthetics and artistic practices to a postmodern revision. But the viewer was also invited to become part of the movement himself: by delivering revolutionary speeches and slogans from a pulpit surrounded by heroic figures and equipped with a microphone.

For one of their first solo exhibitions in the UK, Chto Delat?, the St Petersburg-based platform of artists, philosophers, social researchers and activists installed an ecstatic sensorium for the viewer: comprised of video, wall drawings, sculpture, audio and a free newspaper, it is a total immersion into their critical practice, an amalgam of art, activism and theory. Chto Delat? see their various activities as part of a larger struggle "to advance leftist ideas and discover anew their emancipatory potential", where aesthetic practice enacts "new forms for the sensual and critical apprehension of the world from the perspective of collective