

Issue 20 winter 2007 \$7.00

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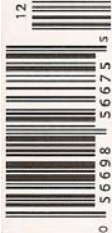
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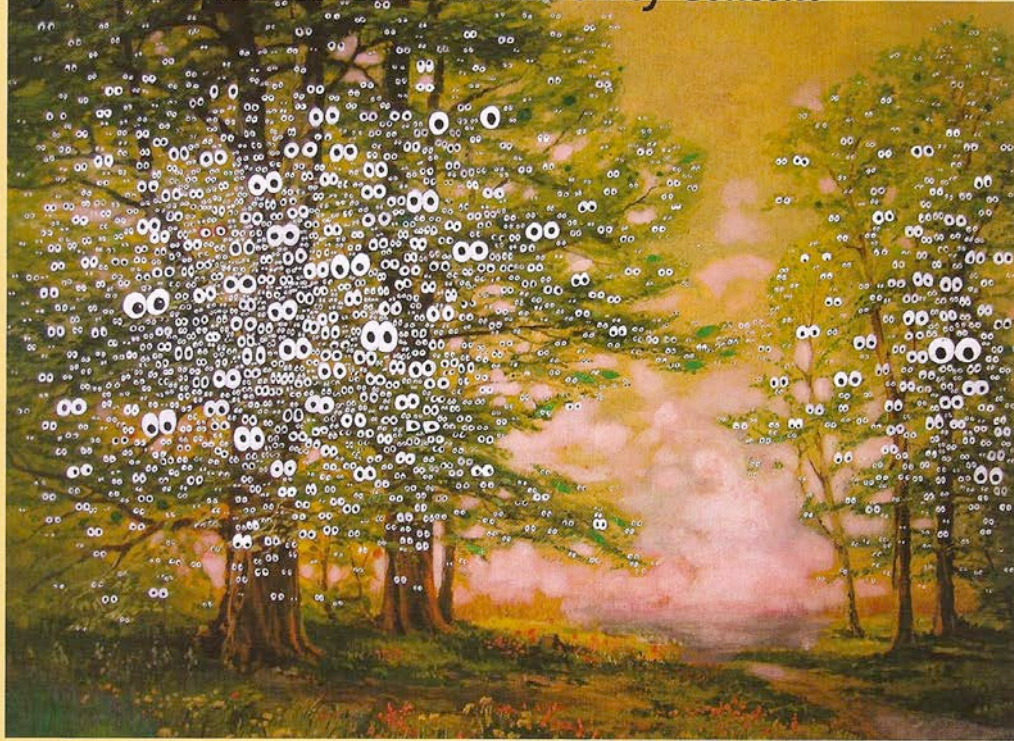
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## Lift and Separate: The Absolution of Consent



### NANCY JONES

Visions of freedom—existential or creative—have always been paramount among art’s prospects. Negotiating the borderline between art and advertising has up till now proved a one-way affair, but even this defense has considerably waned.

Images are now being used indiscriminately across or over the board of former distinctions. Ads use art to sell their products and art immerses itself in mass culture. A loss of separation between visual art and raw commerce weakens the time-honored contrast between advertising’s inherent power to create consumers and art’s more through-composed interaction with viewers. Corporations today

extol the image of art in order to appropriate its mandate of intellectual and personal freedom, while commercials in turn have become more sophisticated, insightful, and individually “branded.” The distinction between high and low has thus become devalued, making all cultural artifacts potentially equivalent.

In this age of universally graven images, representations of self are fleshed out according to broad social categories apportioning membership in certain families, scenes, or packs. Needless to say, a prescribed set of visual codes spells out identity for every cultural setting, genre, or community. Whether it is a computer screensaver, the billboards we drive by, mail-order catalogues, spam, or the rest of the junk we encoun-

ter daily, all of these visuals are instantly recognizable. At the level of both visual meaning and personal identity, art and advertising have now become almost indistinguishable.

In the earlier part of last century, Viennese émigré Edward L. Bernays, Freud’s nephew and “father of public relations” (Goebbels reportedly used his 1923 *Crystallizing Public Opinion* to round up German Jews), set about peddling his pseudo-Pavlovian theory of propaganda as news, what he termed “the engineering of consent”: “If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing about it? The recent practice of propaganda

has proved that it is possible, at least up to a certain point and within certain limits" (*Propaganda* [1928]). One of Bernays's principal techniques was to solicit "third-party authorities" in his PR campaigns, like when he used a survey showing that most doctors endorsed eating a hearty breakfast, illustrated it with a meal of bacon and eggs, and then recommended bacon and eggs to the American public—as "a hearty breakfast." Other examples of such indirect, misappropriated "ballyhoo" orchestrated by Bernays included women smoking in public, introducing fluoride into the water supply, presidential photo-ops, and convincing everybody that Thomas Edison had invented the light bulb (when it was in fact Joseph Swan). In short, arranging for the first U.S. publication of Freud's *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* and touting gas-guzzling, six-cylinder cars (in his 1928-29 Dodge campaign) was all part of Bernays's generalized use of the media "tie-in" to manipulate the "organized habits and opinions of the masses [as] an important element in democratic society," thereby preying on public fears of the "unseen mechanism [or] invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country."

Bernays's legacy reaches its zenith today. Advanced consumers have proved virtually helpless against the demand for "product identification," for selfhood as an endless array of designer goods or brands. Although personal intuition is always an implicit unknown in any media calculation, the passive acceptance of collectively identifiable imagery as a necessary ingredient of all purchase on identity is patently little more than swallowing the medicine of—as Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter once wrote in a letter to FDR—"professional poisoners of the public mind, exploiters of foolishness, fanaticism and self-interest."

Vetting or "counseling" through images has universal appeal, though

it's not restricted to admen and their target audience. One extreme case exemplifies the desire, however delimited, to suspend a word or image in a state of indefinite illegibility. To explore the relationship between image and (conventional) language further, Magritte predictably focused on the communicability of art, minimalizing his palette to potentially exchangeable iconic and literal signs devoid of contextual meaning. It's as if he wanted the viewer to remain on the surface of things, or inside the charmed circle of the self-referential "tie-in," epitomized by his trademark ghostly veils or shrouds that together invoke superficial depth as the ultimate profun-

dity. But "curtains" is also the password to a whole pageant of loss encrypted in Magritte's paintings. In 1912, when he was 14, his mother threw herself from a bridge into the River Sambre on the Franco-Belgian border. When the floating body was found, her dress obscured her face, forming in her son's mind the very image of (unidentifiable) maternal loss. "No more than a curtain hung in front of me," he said. Momentarily seeing nothing but the nightdress, he became paralyzed before the incomprehensible. Thus the curtain, gown, or veil doubles as the last and lasting memory before the impact of traumatic shock that can thus remain forgotten. *This is Not Mama?*





If public and/or private identity is created everyday in our mass-media environment thanks to visual codes to which we are habitually exposed, then their accompanying (postscripted) alibis serve only to reinforce and define this very outlook. Blurred cultural boundaries reflect, in

turn, anxious representations of self. Meaning might be sought in religious or other belief systems, but it is to art, literature, films, TV, video games, billboards, image streaming, etc., that we must turn for a greater understanding of the vast mutable canvas of the identity game.

That the absolution of consent is directly linked to identity counseling explains why one idiom allows a particular person or group to speak more freely while another may be inhibiting. There are now even cases of deaf couples using embryo screening and in vitro fertilization to produce genetically deaf offspring. They simply wish to avoid having children who can hear and so are less likely to use sign language, thus losing an intimate bond with their parents. The language of the greater number may well mend dams or wounds

in mainstream environments, but equally brands those who can't or won't hack it as utterly beyond the pale.

At the same time, an infinite number of emotional hues and tones can only exist via the medium of language. Certain native tongues only use one term to cover two colors, allowing context to determine which is meant (like the English "ochre," for instance). Yet even if linguistic convention defines what we see or don't see, the yearning for identity and meaning still remains. It can be found in collectively charged public events like rock concerts, C-SPAN, blogs, or such online interactive encyclopedias as Wikipedia, which feeds a sense of communal togetherness and univocality.

This uneasy, often cheerless *Gemütlichkeit* remains fundamental to the way a spoonful of spleen helps the saccharine go down. Even "failed" celebrities and the constant demand for their redress can result in conformity and avid consumption. Like sweets to the sweet, all groups pattern themselves and patter after consumables, without which they would literally be nothing. Whether the result of intense globalization or the World Wide Web, the increased occasion for contact with others



NANCY JONES, (TOP TO BOTTOM) THREE GRADES, 1997, OIL ON CANVAS, 40.5 x 51 CM. MOUINS, 2007, ENAMEL ON WOOD PANEL, 46 x 61 CM. COURTESY THE ARTIST.

has both radically advanced the cause of individuality and brought it into disrepute as a constantly renewable (hence always diminishing) resource. "I shop therefore I am," quipped Barbara Kruger. Except that today the Balkanization of the entire planet enables diverse cultures and groups to crystallize around certain common interests while others facilitate their mutual (and fiercely maintained) independence.

In fact, inherent conflict is now a major determinant of public acceptance. Fitting in or standing in line establishes the way we position ourselves vis-à-vis the alternative, just as the threat of a contrary opinion or act sometimes works to create divisions where there are none. Then the selfsame group breaks off all communication and throws up a smoke screen to minimize collateral damage. President Bush once said in a famous speech, "You're either with us or you're with the terrorists." And why not, in a world where the only reason we eat bacon and eggs for breakfast is because of an arbitrary association between "hearty" and "healthy." Whether implied or slicked up in negative psychology, possible conflict or injury soon hardens into group resolve even without official endorsement.

This engineered fall into consumer terrorism marshals various stereotypes to its defense. These discriminatory tropes monitor the behavior of self-styled groups toward perceived "others" along racial, generational, religious, sexual, or professional lines, including such outsiders as body piercers, alien abductees, geeks, romance novel aficionados, goths, sci-fi fans, druggies, and the like. Western terrorist cells could even have grown up watching *Chilly Willy* or *Tweety Bird* on TV, unconsciously imprinting them with explosive ideas. All groups are in fact characterized by their members' ability to recognize each other through distinct yet scarcely perceptible signs or details, like the arch of an eyebrow or the Acme Giant Rubber Band ("For Tripping Road Runners"). These subtle triggers of visual recognition often read like cookbooks or epic poems.

Such stereotypes as teen idioms or rhetorical jargon intervene as shortcuts to perceiving and processing complex information about the surrounding world, and (as

with any form of abbreviation) can cause interference patterns or distortions in established ways of thinking. Stylization, for instance, is itself a code that can be used as a stenographer uses shorthand. One danger in using embellished common denominators, especially in regard to gender, is to assume that it can be understood simply as a category of contradiction (for example, between men and women, or masculine and feminine). Vital nuances of the real can be lost or way-laid. Nudity as a sign shows submissiveness, but female sexuality and desire can often-times prove aggressive. While women may consistently be depicted or viewed in vulnerable poses, the pursuit of a flat, cartoon-like, or simplified image can end up rendering the abstraction harmless. Irony arises when the figure seems aware of the viewer and gazes back at him, as in Manet's *Olympia* (1863). When the woman looks back, the pornography fades. What haunts this scene is the possibility of confrontation or exchange with feminine desire.

Directing and redirecting ("tying in") thought patterns and moods can be brought about and maintained via rote repetition. Two-dimensional symbols are of course the easiest to reclaim or subvert, and appropriation is usually only a gratuitous acceptance of the world "as is," but what continues on unabated beyond all such reductions to a common language is the urge to reflect individual experience. An image repeated can evoke depth both spatially and conceptually, all the while remaining flat or pointless. Recognition of one image as being *like* another allows us to focus on the act of reading or rescanning *in time*, exchanging points of view while remaining within a single continuity shot. This continual reframing of the same image allows viewers the time to keep up with or *relativize* the concept—to love or leave it.

Visual flatness can indeed be arousing



and quite elastic despite its schematic two-dimensionality, projecting or emitting the stuff of sensuality. Leitmotifs in painting, historically or religiously coded repetitions of the same pose or symbol, and even the pared-down, targeted "look" or style of a crass advertising campaign all contain the germ of multifarious nuances of personal and occasional reflection.

In general morphological terms, the color, shape, and pattern of any optical illusion can elicit mental calmness, confusion, or distress. The freedom to inform existence requires having a sensitive eye (and ear) to all existing visual codes. We "lift and separate"—apropos the 1964 Wonderbra ad—our view of reality from the general image pool in accordance with momentarily charged needs or choices. Images can be grasped long before they are dressed up as signs, giving us the insight of resemblance they forever after denote.

NANCY JONES is an artist based in New York and Berlin. Her work is featured in the upcoming Berlin exhibition, "Achtung FSK18 Vol. 2."