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Propaganda, Aesthetics & Contemporary Art: Languages and Rehearsals of Power

An Aesthetic Language of Power
Because the art object is never an ultimate statement but instead extends an invitation to the creation and achievement of further meanings, its existence and effect is dialogical and is never finished. The dialogical function of art—its role as translator between experience and experiencer—is what makes it productive of new perceptions and new meanings.
-William S. Lewis

In every society power must be visible to be meaningful. But, like the shifting political actors that exercise it, the representation of power is not fixed and is constantly redefined through the symbolic. If art allows for transformative experiences, can it transform, or redefine, the meaning of power for its audiences? What would it mean to construct a visual language that permits the exploration of empowerment? What visual codes or idioms might it be possible to draw on? Power of course must be understood in relational terms, and so any visual language or aesthetic must tap into a shared vocabulary already present in society for the sake of its legibility. In other words, the artist must take into consideration those existing sociopolitical relationships as well as existing languages of power as the artist's clay to be molded. Perhaps an aesthetic can be constructed that takes up established languages of power for artistic ends.

When power is applied to art, our thoughts quickly arrive at propaganda art. When we think of 20th century propaganda, we know of its incredible power in affecting transformative change through aesthetic persuasion. For artists to take it up as part of an 'autonomous' practice is no small thing. Can such a pre-existing language, charged with its own historical connotations, be used to different ends without reducing artwork to the service of narrow political goals? Artists must maintain a practice that is not subservient or instrumentalized to political ends. Were the latter not the case, the artists risks converting their work into a tool, or a means to an end rather than a work to be understood on its own terms. Nevertheless, the possibility of using an aesthetic of power may allow for the artist to open up a space for exploration, a space for rehearsal of power, through the language of propaganda. In what follows, I look at artistic practices that apply the language of propaganda in order to think through these questions. This adoption of aesthetics must be understood in its historical relation to propaganda art, as well as the ontological evolution of the image itself.

The Death of Propaganda Art
The term propaganda itself is highly pejorative, suggesting manipulation and deceit. It distinguishes itself from more respected art forms by virtue of its nature as a tool that shapes and controls the spectator. Propaganda art intervenes directly in the political sphere, often through activity outside of the autonomous artistic sphere. But its relationship to politics through history has been far more complex. Taken up by incommensurable ideologies, propaganda has provided a language of power – a language capable of shaping sociopolitical relationships – through its aesthetic force.

By 1945, Joseph Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda and Enlightenment had produced 1,097 films; a staggering number of films in the Ministry's twelve years of existence. While many

of these films were an obvious depiction of what we understand as propaganda, the majority however were far less politically overt or 'propagandistic'. These films were subtler in their promotion of Nazi values and found their effectiveness in what they hid, rather than what they revealed. Goebbels recognized that "the best propaganda is that which, as it were, works invisibly, penetrates the whole of life without the public having any knowledge of the propagandistic initiative" (Koonz, 2004, p.13). Unsurprisingly, it is the subtler form of propaganda that dominates contemporary propaganda.

The overt and historical forms of propaganda we associate with early to mid 20th century politics have (almost) become a historical relic in the West; its political rhetoric far too obvious for a population well versed in media. Because they are deemed politically ineffective and neutralized through decades of media exposure to media-savvy citizens, these propaganda aesthetics have become an object of historical study. They are now found in museums as historical relics, in art as detached reflections on aesthetics, in advertising as commodification, and even dorm rooms as poster decorations.

Brian Welsh's 2019 film *Beats* captures the emerging rave scene of the nineties in Scotland and follows the generation born after 1977 when radical European politics had come to a close. Their demand to party, take drugs and celebrate their youth in the face of police crackdowns is steeped in the rhetoric of revolutionary left politics and its imagery. But the call to arms is replaced with a call to party. This paints a perfect picture of a neutralized radical image. But just the same, we understand why such imagery and language is embraced: it is an aesthetic with enduring appeal that is repeatedly taken up by subsequent generations, if only as a veneer.

Propaganda Aesthetics in Contemporary Art
With the traditional propagandistic image largely de-instrumentalized through its abandonment by state politics, it is now taken up by artists as an aesthetic to explore. Were such an aesthetic still relevant in contemporary politics, it would be difficult to separate the work of artists as art from politicking. Rather than use propaganda imagery as a tool of political persuasion, artists are able to explore the language of power as a rehearsal of power. A rehearsal suggests the embodied experience of power; the exercise of power as exercise rather than execution by creating a new subjective experience. Rehearsals are not 1:1. They remain undetermined, vulnerable and not defined - rejecting the pre-packaged identities of propaganda messaging. This art can not merely be a political instrument. It must carry a creative capacity through its enactment or assembly, and provide its own critical testing ground. The propaganda aesthetic is used to open up a space for the artist, subject or even spectator to carry out symbolic gestures, enact power or re-enact a history.

I have limited my own reflections on a collection of contemporary artistic practices that are using a recognizably propagandistic aesthetic to foster meaningful political reflection as well as aesthetic enjoyment, divorced from the instrumentalized form of propaganda. These artists appropriate propagandistic modes and gestures as forms of re-imagining power to open up

new modes of being as well as alternate utopias. They employ aesthetic languages of power to exercise political agency while maintaining a sense of implausibility. This latter sense provides a critical testing ground divorced from political instruments, serving more as a thought-experiment rather than a plan of action. There work often deals with the impossible condition and the speculative. Similarly, Deleuze identifies political art and especially cinematographic art with the task of "not…addressing a people, which is presupposed already there, but of contributing to the invention of a people" (Deleuze, 1989, p. 217). This is not to say that the use of this political language is void of political purpose or entirely ineffective in artistic work. Often, the ideological underpinning of a work is stated affirmatively, but represented through an aesthetic mode rather than an activist mode.

Of course, propaganda imagery has been present in art in a non-instrumentalized capacity for decades, including the works of Diego Rivera or Barbara Kruger. However, their contemporary application by artists functions within a post-structuralist context, conflating geographies and time-periods, always recycling in order to reconstitute. Furthermore, the function of the image in society has itself transformed, taking on new ontological properties that allow it to act not merely as a referent but as a subject, opening up a new space where the depiction of power can lead to the subjective experience of power, however suspended in time and place it may be. These artists specifically use pre-existing imagery that has been closely associated with power and propaganda. They take up its gestures asserting them and perpetuating them. They reuse, redirect and re-mobilize the latent power found within these forceful aesthetics for their own sometimes nuanced, sometimes overt provocations and speculations. And in as much as propaganda aesthetics are politically neutral (as we will see below), they are open to political shaping by the artist. The persuasive force of their aesthetics can still be mobilized to reimagine and rehearse the power of new, reconstituted socio-political relationships through a visual frame.

Historical Propaganda & Minor Aesthetics

While our popular understanding of propaganda is rooted in that of the 20th century, art's relation to shaping power is far longer. The anticipation of modern propaganda begins with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, when art's relationship to the ruling powers was reconstituted in service of Popular and often Republican movements. New political powers no longer legitimized by Church authority enlisted artists to depict them and their politics favourably. Here, the ideological battlefield of art truly begins when, for example, artists like Antonio Perez Gisbert becomes the sponsored artist for Spain's Left while rival Casado del Alisal paints for the conservative establishment.

Antonio Perez Gisbert, *Execution of Torrijos and his Companions on the Beach at Malaga*, 1888

Casado del Alisal, *St. James in the Battle of Clavijo*, 1885

Portraiture art, a long-standing form of representation of power, took to new heights during this time with grandiose depictions of leaders in what we now recognize as propagandistic aesthetics. These forms of early modern propaganda have been taken up within a constellation of postcolonial, marginalized, and feminist artwork where the language of the oppressor is adopted for their own political positioning; a strategy we can perhaps call a "minor aesthetic".[1] Deleuze and Guatarri initially proposed a theory of minor literature where a minority group writing in a major language has the capacity to destabilize and undermine the dominant language, culture, and discourse in which its authors operate (Deleuze, Guattari 1986, p. 16-27). Deleuze and Guatarri first applied this theory to the work of Franz Kafka, a

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[1] The concept of minor literature applied to art is also put forward by Mieke Bleyen in *Minor Aesthetics: The Photographic Work of Marcel Marien*, Leuven University Press, 2014.

Jewish writer in Prague writing in the dominant German language of his time. The tension between the identity and location of the "minor" coupled to the dominant "major" culture offers an opportunity to reconstitute or reinterpret the dominant culture. Patricia Pisters expands on this claiming that, "art creates itself as a foreign language in a dominant language, precisely in order to express an impossibility of living under domination: (Pisters, 2015).

We can thus identify a visual equivalent, or a minor aesthetic, in the work of African-American artist Kehinde Wiley who paints heroic and naturalistic portraits of African-Americans. He is well known for his official portraits of Michelle and Barack Obama for the National Portrait Gallery. He blends a firmly contemporary depiction of individuals using historically appropriated poses and backgrounds from European art. One of his paintings takes the famous 1801 Jacques-Louis David portrait of Napoleon crossing the Alps on his white horse, replacing Napoleon with a black man wearing a bandana and cargo clothing. The horse, cape and pose are preserved from the original, with a new background of a European flower-motif one would expect to find decorating the walls of an 18th century European home. Continuing his use of Napoleonic art, Wiley takes the 1806 portrait by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres of the Emperor sitting on his throne replacing him with American rapper Ice-T. The rapper now holds the Emperor's sceptre, draped in his cloak, while gazing authoritatively at the spectator. The spectator's recognition of the power and authority ascribed to his figures is clear through the use of established political images; propaganda images of their own time meant to legitimize the political authority of the poser.

Kehinde Wiley, *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*, 2005 next to Jacques-Louis David's, *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, 1803.

In the case of Napoleon, these are a historically unprecedented type of propagandistic image, where divine appointment no longer underwrote his power, requiring an incredibly aggressive self-legitimization through image. Again, we see the enactment of power through a propagandistic language. Wiley has made a world populated with Black figures of authority that fold time and space together, thoroughly destabilizing our established notion of the representation of power. The work of course remains implausible through its compression of

space and time in an alternate history. His politics are clear, and in fact we can say that they are part of the political legitimization of Black power, but their playful historical revision and implausible depictions allows them to unfold their political dialectic within the constraints of aesthetic enjoyment.

Popular Propaganda of the 20th Century
The modern propaganda art that exists in the popular imagination is often associated with the avant-garde of the 20th Century that produced movements explicitly aligned with left-wing propaganda including Constructivism in Bolshevik Russia or Berlin's Dadaists in the Interwar period. One of the most influential movements, Constructivism, saw the artist as an engineer responsible for shaping sociopolitical relationships in society. El Lissitsky's famous *Beat the Whites with Red Wedge* (1919) applies the bold lines, horizontal slashes, geometric forms and limited colour schemes of this new politically-useful art in support of the Bolshevik Red Army during the civil war. Constructivism was meant to provide a total synthesis of "the ideological aspect with the formal", (First Programme of the Working Group of Constructivists, 1921) where Marxist ideology would be visually inscribed in artwork.

El Lissitsky, s Beat the Whites with Red Wedge, 1919

Similarly, Futurism in Italy emerged in 1909 under Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, applying comparable aesthetics while taking up motion and speed as its motif of the future. The movement's close association with Italian Fascism as well as the influence of Russian Futurists on the Russian avant-garde places it as an emerging form of a new political aesthetic. But these new avant-garde forms, in their conceptual and formal operation, would prove too vague and unusable for both the Russian Bolsheviks and European Fascists. A contemporary Russian account relates an old woman examining a cubist poster depicting a large fish eye and declaring, "They want us to worship the devil!'" (Nelson, 2017). By the thirties, when radical politics had emerged victorious, state-sponsored art in Soviet Russia was dominated by a constructivist-inspired Socialist Realism and agit-prop. These styles were much more forceful in ideology and representational than the avant-garde. The bold lines, restricted palette and geometries were applied to images of heroic men and women, towering leaders, and the machinery of war and industry. They inspired a sense of power and authority,

as well as a sense of utopianism that seduced the spectator. They provided an ordered and packaged world, with clearly defined identities to be taken on by their audience that was the source of their appeal.

Jules Perahim, *Fighting for Peace*, 1950. An example of Socialist Realism

One of the most interesting historical facts of this art was its adoption by both radical Right and radical Left politics. Looking at the propaganda posters of the Spanish Revolution, the posters of the right-wing Falangists are nearly interchangeable with those of the left-wing Republicans. Only the hint of the Falangist symbol or the Republican colours tells them apart. Adolf Hitler was strongly opposed to expressionist and avant-garde art, preferring a form of neo-classical art, which differed from ancient Hellenism in terms of heroic attitude (Schmid, 2005 p. 129). This was the art that made its way into Albert Speer's vision of the Reich's capital, Germania, as well as state-sponsored art. Hitler's infamous 1937 exhibition *Entartete Kunst*, or Degenerate Art, gathered avant-garde work in order to subject it to total criticism. Adolf Ziegler, Hitler's favorite painter, headed the exhibition and was appointed by the Nazis to oversee the destruction of this so-called degenerate art. It is quite revealing that despite Hitler's complete rejection of the avant-garde, it was consistently used in Nazi propaganda art aimed at the popular masses. This is an art no different from the Soviet art of his political enemies. No doubt, he too was forced to admit its captivating and effective power; a power similarly recognized by contemporary artists.

Nazi propaganda poster (left) and Soviet propaganda poster (right).

In the Dutch-Israeli artist Yael Bartana's film trilogy, …*and Europe will be Stunned* (2007-11), Bartana takes up the utopian artistic language borrowed from Nazi and Zionist films.[2] The work, representing the Polish pavilion in the 2017 Venice Biennale, intermixes symbols of Israel and Polish history while postulating the return of Polish Jews to Poland. In the opening segment, Sławomir Sierakowski, the real-life leader of the Polish left-wing Krytyka Polityczna (Political Critique) movement, delivers an impassioned speech imploring Jews to return to rebuild a homeland: "Let the 3 million Jews that Poland has missed… return to Poland, to your country." Bartana plays with the sweeping rhetoric of political rally speeches, framed by dramatic low-angle shots reminiscent of a Leni Riefenstahl film.[3] Notably, this speech is delivered in an empty and abandoned stadium; it remains unclear to which audience the speaker addresses, playing with his dislocation in time. Later on, a Jewish group is seen triumphantly and romantically constructing buildings on the site of the Warsaw Ghetto. These acts of course remain impossible in the real world. The grandiose speech is delivered to no one; a possible homeland is erected at an unimaginable location. Nevertheless, Bartana is playing with a possibility of a world where the sociopolitical arrangement between Jews and Poles, and the political fulfillment of a Jewish homeland in Europe is explored, however implausible it remains. All this is done through the frame of propaganda aesthetic that is repurposed for a radically anti-Nazi and anti-Zionist speculation.

Yael Bartana, …*and Europe will be Stunned*, 2007-11

While Bartana argued that she herself remained ambivalent about the value of such a return, she would later go on to establish The Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland (JRMiP); a forum functioning somewhere between art and politics. This is a group psychotherapy where national 'demons' are exposed (www.jrmip.org) and offers "an impossible artwork, a quintessential act of deconstruction sprung from the limitless space of rhetorical production at the margins of the imaginary / pragmatic dialectic." (Carson, 2012). Does this suggest that the

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[2] Zionist propaganda films themselves borrowed the visual language of Nazi propaganda.
[3] Bartana's work was criticized in Russia because the aesthetics of her film carried too many negative associations with Stalinism (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art 2013). This underscores an important point: languages of power are culturally-specific, not universal.

fictional rehearsal of European Jewish power through a language of power engendered a real political exploration of the possible? Bartana also does not use actors preferring instead to have real political figures deliver their own speeches using their own words. In this sense, her art practice becomes a vehicle for politicians to enact their own political beliefs, their own rhetoric, and their own political agency. Nevertheless, a sense of a detached enjoyment of aesthetics by Bartana permeates her work. Her position throughout remains ambiguous through the postulation of the implausible. She never openly suggests a politically moral position but instead uses the established propagandistic frames to evoke emotion within the spectator, leaving the spectator to approve/disapprove for themselves.

Yael Bartana, …*and Europe will be Stunned*, 2007-11

Usability versus Instrumentalization

Like other artists examined in this paper, Bartana's work is potentially usable but cannot be understood to be instrumentalized as propaganda art is understood. Propaganda is instrumentalized because it acts upon and can be used by political agents. As we saw in the above historical examples, it serves, or is subservient to political ideologies. But this does not accurately reflect the autonomous art practices of artists that explore both the aesthetics and the rehearsal to power that propaganda permits. As non-instrumentalized work it is also not subject to the same evaluation criteria as propaganda art. Certainly, there are artists whose work is explicitly propaganda; artwork that is first and foremost characterized by its useability. For instance, the Dutch artist Jonas Staal is known for his World Summits; a political forum that unites politically disenfranchised or marginalized groups to rehearse power through the vehicle of his art practice (Staal, 2017). In his doctoral thesis, *Propaganda Art from the 20th to the 21st Century*, Staal outlines the origins and coherence of propaganda within democracy, and its relevance to contemporary art practices. Of course, a more critical reading of art in general can interpret all art as propaganda. Activist Upton Sinclair declared, "All art is propaganda. It is universally and inescapably propaganda; sometimes unconsciously, but often deliberately, propaganda" (Sinclair, 1925).

It seems that any artform can be made useful or instrumentalized, even when it is not the artist's concern. The US State Department's 1946 touring exhibition, *Advancing American Art*, used the art of Stuart Davis, Georgia O'Keefe and others to promote American culture in

the Soviet satellites. A painting by Jackson Pollock seems far removed from Cold War politics and yet Abstract Impressionism came to be the C.I.A.'s symbol of democratic and creative freedom. Despite this critical reading of artwork, we cannot say that their formal qualities elicit a sense of propaganda in the public mind. More importantly, providing an aesthetic language of power is not the primary artistic concern.

While a line can certainly be drawn between the autonomous art of expressionists, cubists, suprematists, etc. and the agit-prop of poster art, or instructive Socialist Realism, the latter's aesthetics could not exist without the former's symbolic and expressionistic contribution to aesthetics. And yet, these instrumentalized art forms are often excluded from art history. (Groys, 2008, p. 145). Propaganda is usually understood as weak in artistic terms. It lacks the independent style of the artist and flounders in its static repetition. However, Boris Groys rightly points out that this is an art form that requires different evaluation criteria. Propaganda art is effective when it becomes reproducible; capable of effectively transmitting messages to its public (Groys, 2008, p. 146). When we judge it by its reproducibility and popularity, this is a highly successful form of art and its appeal remains obvious. Every so often, it makes a re-appearance in the political arena, however rare. Detroit-artist Shepard Fairey created the most iconic poster of the century with his 2008 image of Barack Obama inscribed with the word "Hope". It would become the official poster used by Obama's election campaign and was circulated endlessly in popular media.

Shepard Fairey, *Hope*, 2008

My own work, *Power to Power* (2019), is a photo-collage work that takes up the poster propaganda format to provide an illustration of the symbols, relationships and political actors that collect themselves under separate political ideologies. The work draws heavily from 17th century alchemical engravings that illustrate a highly structured and ultimately usable universe. Much like Srnecic and Williams' call to create 'maps' that allow us to understand the complex relationships of power and capital of neoliberalism (Srnicek, Williams, 2015) these posters illustrate both a neoliberal understanding of the worlds arrangement as well as a

more global emancipatory worldview. The works are populated with symbols, historical figures, flags, and 'values' that relate to each political worldview. They are meant to be understood as a sort of propaganda poster that allows the viewer to begin to make sense of the dynamic forces behind certain sociopolitical arrangements of the world, as well as utopic visions.

Much like propaganda posters they are meant to be 'readable'. While they can be understood as usable inasmuch as they attempt to illuminate certain political dynamics, they remain wholly apart from instructive political posters despite taking up similar aesthetics. By placing incommensurable politics side-by-side and applying similar visual languages, we can appreciate the echo of propaganda aesthetics in contemporary movements, as well as more recent political semiotic language. Furthermore, the presentation of opposing ideologies provides an ambiguous positioning of the spectator; opposing utopias are offered but neither manages to overtake the other, both balanced in their shared language of aesthetics.

The Neutrality of Propaganda Aesthetics

What I have hinted at above is that the propaganda art we most closely associate with 20th century radical politics has a far more complex relationship to ideology. Fascist art itself does not tend toward a particular style (neo-classical, for instance) but can "adopt any artistic style which seemed efficient and powerful enough to fulfil the purpose of political propaganda and corporate design" (Schmid, 2005, p. 139). Similarly, there is no artwork which has fascistic tendencies, only artwork associated with fascism through historical coincidence. Even so, such associations can be reconstituted. It would be unconvincing to argue that the heroic sport-body-shaping of the Aryan man of Nazi Germany - a fairly novel social ideal at the time - is meaningfully echoed in the heavy sport-body-shaping culture of today. And much like that heroic male ideal is borrowed from ancient Athens, most fascist aesthetics were borrowed and drew their strength from a pre-existing and enduring visual representation of power (Mosse, 2018, p. 249). What can be said about propaganda, whether left- or right-wing, is that, like advertising, it works by stirring up strong emotions, or agitating the spectator into a frenzy, through its persuasive rhetoric. Once agitated, the viewer is hit with the ideological message. To borrow an example from a 2017 Super Bowl ad: a young girl is seen racing boys in a soap box race, cheered on by her father.

> "What do I tell my daughter? Do I tell her that her grandpa is worth more than her grandma? That her dad is worth more than her mom? Do I tell her that despite her education, her drive, her skills, her intelligence, she will automatically be valued less than every man she ever meets? Or maybe, I'll be able to tell her something different." (Audi, 2017)

We are emotionally moved, stirred by a sense of social injustice. Suddenly, the word 'AUDI' appears. It is a difficult leap of the imagination to tie expensive consumer vehicles with

gender inequality but such is the power of a propagandistic rhetoric.[4] What is interesting is not so much the rhetorical play of bait-and-switch but that propaganda (like advertising) admits through this play that it cannot advance a discursive argument. More specifically, a visual language or aesthetic is unable to advance a coherent or logical argument; an image simply does not function that way. This is why the Constructivist dream of an art that embodies an ideology in its formal construction could be misconstrued as devil worship. What this implies is that there is no artwork that can put forward a persuasive argument organized by a visual dialectic. There is an irrational component to propaganda which must be processed by the viewer through emotional image. Even fascist speeches, seemingly a discursive form of argumentation, took the form of symbolic action (Mosse, 2018, p. 247).

Ulrich Schmid points out that, "even Hitler did not believe in the preservation of an aesthetic interpretation or appreciation. That is why embedded in his racial policy was the idea that only a single (Aryan) race that remains pure can transmit genetically a predisposition toward an attitude reflected in the heroic art of his making" (Schmid 2005, p.131). Schmid makes an argument that integral to Hitler's racial policy was the belief that the way one understands art has nothing to do with the artwork itself; a consistent interpretation of artwork requires an inherited nature of viewing the world. The alternative is to risk the artwork's misinterpretation or co-optation. Lebanese-artist Rabih Mroué, known for his politically charged theatre works takes on a resigned attitude to the future fate of his art believing that "all my artwork will eventually be co-opted" (Hlavajova, Winder, 2012, p. 17).

In his analytical film of cinema, The Pervert's Guide to Ideology (2012), philosopher Slavoj Žižek discusses how Beethoven's Ninth Symphony has been taken up by contradictory political movements throughout history: the symphony was a highlight of the Nazi Symphony repertoire, much adored by Hitler; Chairman Mao excepted the work from his ban on Western culture considering it a piece of enlightened Western work; the reactionary government of Rhodesia went as far as adopting it as its national anthem. He goes on to examine the on-stage aesthetics of the German rock group Rammstein, a politically neutral band, which takes up seemingly fascist imagery transforming them into empty gestures for the sake of their pure aesthetic enjoyment.

Jordi Colomer's work ¡Únete! Join Us! for the 2017 Spanish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale offered a video work closely engaged in a utopic revolutionary language for a contemporary mobile population. Like the fascist gestures of Rammstein, Colomer takes up a visual language of revolution, articulated ambiguously. The film follows a group of people, closer to a movement, as they move from site to site led by female leaders. The women give speeches, moving from one European language to another, echoing their physical transitory movement. Their props and dress seem ad-hoc, similar to the provisional architecture that characterizes his sculptural work in the same pavilion. Intermixed with these scenes, singer Lydia Lunch

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[4] Adam Curtis' Century of the Self (2002) provides an analysis of how propaganda would evolve into the advertising industry, rebranded as Public Relations by Edward Bernays at the end of the first World War.

rides on the back of a pick-up truck with a megaphone urging us to cast off the chains of oppression, to unite, and to take power.

Jordi Colomer, *¡Únete! Join Us!*, 2017

Colomer does not use this populist and revolutionary language in the service of any particular cause, the way it can be seen in Bartana or Wiley's work. Rather, he allows us to enjoy their aesthetic by removing a clear political position and applying his imagery to implausible scenarios. His band of roving utopians however is reminiscent of the displaced and mobile populations of the present and the presentation of a mobile and ephemeral architecture-infrastructure suggests a worldview sympathetic if not fully restructured to meet the demands of contemporary immigration. The imperative cry of the title "¡Únete! itself is very reminiscent of Latin American revolutionary slogans, which carries the connotation of a people united. He enacts the emergence of an international sociopolitical movement by having his actors move through European cities drawing real crowds. At the same time, his imperative command to the spectator to unite, however unlikely, asks us to underwrite the utopic dream with our own faith as spectator. Unlike other examples we have seen, it is not clear who this group is that enacts power, nor if that is their intention. At a minimum, they retain the cloak of a propagandistic rhetoric.

Jordi Colomer, *¡Únete! Join Us!*, 2017

In my short film *Karaöke* (2019), a group of young men and women are seen at the bar enjoying a night of karaoke. This casual and frivolous setting is marked by the group's singing of Nazi propaganda songs. The group's ambiguous ethnic composition and sexual orientation, along with their seeming indifference to the content of the songs suggest a total divorce between the identities of the singers and the politics of the music. Instead, we are left with performs engaged in pure aesthetic enjoyment. In this work I have tried to ask the spectator to consider to what extent this aesthetic enjoyment is problematic, if even possible. Even the lyrics themselves can be interpreted as ambiguous slogans, adaptable to any politics and only historically contextualized by virtue of the lyrics in German, as well as our own historical associations. It suggests the political force of historical propaganda can be emptied of its persuasive effect in the contemporary, relatable to us only in its aesthetic qualities. Or perhaps, these songs can be re-appropriated for radically new meanings not unlike the registers of power employed in minor aesthetics.

At the time of this writing contemporary forms of political propaganda art online are a repetition of a historical mix of counterculture art of extreme right Futurists and extreme left Dadaists (Disruption Network Lab, 2018). Author Angel Nagle in turn analyzes how post-internet aesthetics as well as transgression are used by both left- and right-wing propagandists online (Nagle, 2017). The image's inability to speak for itself is summed up by the online right-wing slogan "The Left can't meme". Online, the Left is ridiculed for its inability to create short, catchy memes, relying excessively on text to establish an intellectual argument. This is not surprising. The evolution of Left-wing politics emerged from intellectual discourse and stands in stark contrast to the contradictory and incoherent politics of the Right that is once again gaining momentum through the use of images. What the above illustrates is that visual aesthetics can be reconfigured, restructured and even co-opted. In that sense, the aesthetics of propaganda are neither good nor bad, neither right- nor left-wing. This has more to do with how art as image functions.

Online meme on "Lefty Memes" uploaded to Reddit in 2018.

A Theory of the Contemporary Image
Despite the historically recent invention of photography the film, the role of the image in society has dramatically shifted in recent decades. While originally the photographic image was understood to capture an objective reality, whose surface was a faithful image of the world, the naiveté of this logic was challenged in the 1960s. Photography and film were ultimately deconstructed as mere representations of the world; a framed distortion of the world at best, and an outright manipulation by the image-maker at worst. David Levi Strauss speaks about photography as providing the semblance of evidence rather than evidence itself (Strauss 2005). His essay writings document how photography is used to establish an ideology not by providing real images of a political claim, but by speaking to an ideology through staging or insinuation. Similarly, Alain Badiou speaks of the need for the semblance of the passion for the real, where one's passion for the real[5] must be staged in a fiction or public theatre for it to be accepted as evidence of the real (Badiou, 2007). This is immediately tangible in how contemporary politics are often framed as an event -not unlike an artistic happening – that exists in order to be photographed, in order to provide evidence of our passion. The primacy of the image in our understanding of reality and politics begins to emerge.

Philosopher Vilem Flusser describes how images operate on an emotional rather than dialectic level (Flusser, 1990). What is unique about this in the contemporary moment is that we have come to use the image to orient ourselves in the world, rather than the historically reverse relationship. For example, the online identity, so bound to the identity of the self for our generation, is largely built through stylized images. The online avatar can itself become more than a symbolic stand-in but an ontological extension of the self. Boris Groys diagnosed this as an era not of spectacle but of self-design (Groys, 2010, p. 34) that is made possible through the tools of image-making available to the public. Artist Ryan Trecartin can be seen to offer a critique of the self-design-through-image culture through his films that feature grotesque caricatures of media starlets and pop culture personas that self-document for their audience's entertainment. In his films the projected imaged self-eclipses any sense of an authentic self.

Flusser goes as far as to claim that images have established themselves as the causes of events, rather than their illustration or documentation (Flusser, 1990). For him, the turning point is the Romanian revolution of 1989, which was in turn described by Jean Baudrillard as "the moment that the studio became the focal point of the revolution […] everybody ran to the studio to appear on the screen at any price or into the street to be caught by cameras sometimes filming each other. The whole street became the extension of the studio, that is, an extension of the non-place of the event or of the virtual place of the event. The street itself became a virtual space" (Baudrillard 1993, p. 64). Where the individual would once use their world experience to orient themselves in an image, images are now illustrations that orient the individual to the world; the image itself becomes our epistemological foundation. Flusser

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[5] Alain Badiou speaks of the passion for the real as the zealous pursuit of "what is immediately practicable, here and now." (Badiou, 2007, p.58)

argues that this brings about a peculiar situation where logical discourse or political consciousness (as a product of linear or written consciousness) are no longer helpful for our orientation, suggesting a post-history. The image is thus the source of one's ontology, but one that remains maintains a purely emotional dialectic, free to be rearticulated at will by those that ascribe it meaning.

Another understanding of the contemporary image can be found in Boris Groys' comparison of the digital image to the Byzantine icon. The digital image is provided by data, which is invisible to us, and to which we entrust faith that it offers us a true representation of its content. A religious-like leap of faith is suggested in our relationship to the contemporary image heightening the mysticism and magic surrounding images. In this case, the image becomes the concrete reality and the world becomes its pretext. This would have once been called idolatry. Perhaps we live in the age of endlessly permutating idols. Images claim to reveal the world but in the act of limiting what they illustrate, they also hide it. This is exactly how propaganda operates: "propaganda art consists of what it makes visible and invisible at the same time: while it shows one thing, it conceals another" (Staal, 2017, p.251). Groys' analysis of the image as icon is not far from the function of propaganda art. It places the world of image and symbol within the same realm as the everyday reality, where one prefigures the other and is not separate.

Flusser identifies this as the inner dialectic of the image. When an image's ontology becomes the source of reality while also being a fabrication, what does that suggest for our understanding of the world? Giorgio Agamben extends this dialectic to the television: "…truth and falsity became indistinguishable from each other and the spectacle legitimize[s] itself solely through the spectacle (Agamben 2000, p.83). The significance of the image is a bit more ambiguous, however, than Flusser's thesis leads us to believe. We speak on one hand of its low-value and devalued position (Groys, 2010) in an age of its endless reproduction through our screens (Steyerl, 2012). On the other hand, the image's cultural primacy as the source of authority (and distraction) is the driving force behind its ubiquity. Images are thus paradoxically both low-value and high-primacy objects.[6] I raise this point, only because it remains an open question whether as artists working with images we devalue their quality through their relentless reproduction, or we elevate their meaning by multiplying them. If images become their own source of political power, as artists we are capable of producing political agency through our very media.

Francis Alys' work, *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002) offers us a political image meant to directly inspire the faith its title suggests. The work, through film and photography, depicts 500 participants, mostly locals from the outskirts of Lima, working together to move 487-meter sand dune 10 centimetres from its original spot. Armed with shovels and all wearing similar clothing resembling a uniform, the long line of workers evokes populist mass movements, solidarity, and the idealism of labour. It takes up ongoing populist imagery of Latin American politics and repurposes it as a staged event to be seen and documented, rather

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[6] In this context, we should not confuse low-value with low-meaning.

than experienced. In other words, despite the scale of labour in the work, the act itself has no function, merely its visual representation. Through the work, Alys manifests the reality of stagnant and ineffective Latin American politics. Its very purposeless nature is embodied in Alys' mantra for the work: maximum effort, minimum result. But Alys does not intend the representation of the work to remain ineffective: "There is a certain awakening in When Faith Moves Mountains that… allows ideas of change to be introduced into the realms of possibility (Morris, 2015, p.11). Alys identifies as one of the work's objectives to strengthen the community of the subjects and prove to them that faith can move mountains. Alys has created a work that has taken a visual political rhetoric to suggest a new kind of political, communal agency. This agency is not only found within the work of the subjects, but within the spectator at the moment he witnesses the work's image.

Francis Alys, *When Faith Moves Mountains*, 2002

Re-imagining Power

When we apply this understanding of the image to propaganda and its historical forms, we can begin to understand why their dialectic divorce from politics as such is possible, and why artists can apply them to their own politics, identity, or contemplations, or in artistic terms, their aesthetic enjoyment. This of course does not divorce it from its historical significance but offers it up as site of contemplation and reflection, as well as of play.

In Yael Bartana's subsequent work, *What if Women Ruled the World?* (2017), the artist brings together women in power to re-enact the doomsday scenario of Stanley Kubrick's war room scene in Dr. Strangelove. Set up as a series of theatrical re-enactments across cities, she brings a separate group of female politicians, intellectuals, activists, scientists and even military leaders to imagine how a world ruled by women would handle a doomsday scenario. Female actors lead the participants through the scenario blending real-life discussion with scripted dialogue. The work is filmed and subsequently turned into an edited film project. Bartana sets up her participants in a dramatic set providing a physical platform that dramatizes the fiction but provides the enactment of an all-female boardroom.

Yael Bartana, *What if Women Ruled the World?*, 2017-18

Like her previous work, Bartana does not attempt to instrumentalize; her work is not an attempt to re-arrange political power in the real world. Instead, she offers a very provocative scenario – the total reversal of gender power structures – while giving her participants a public platform outside of their professional access. It is easy to imagine that these rehearsals of power, by actually bringing women of power together in one room, creates an affirmation in the participant and spectator's mind of a reconstituted relationship of gender power. At a minimum, it offers these women a chance to connect across disciplines that would never overlap otherwise. Bartana offers us an implausible worldview using visual clichés of power politics but their application to women creates an uncanny affirmation of what may not be impossible. Both *…and Europe will be Stunned* and this latter work, while working with radically different visual languages, can be seen as an exercise in an affirmative political imagination. This political event is more useful to us as an image of women in power brought together in a room. The details of their doomsday planning play a secondary role. Perhaps this rehearsal of female power can have an impact beyond the white cube, like propaganda art, if it indeed provides meaningful conversations and connections among the participants. Or, like an image producing its own reality, the staging of the event across multiple cities engenders its own political model, not unlike Bartana's JRMiP.

In my short film *Utopias* (2019), I have asked: what are those ways of living, as well as those social relationships, that are possible but obscured by dominant ideologies? The narrative follows a woman who resists her eviction from her home in the face of a new development project (commonly known as 'holdouts'). Taking place in a courtroom, the woman uses her own trial as a stage to advance her own worldview, her own idea of progress, and ultimately defend her vision of utopia. This is contrasted with that of the developer, who in turns puts forward his argument for the development project as the embodiment of progress, supported through utopic marketing language. The film borrows from the rhetoric of dramatic, propagandistic speeches of 20th century politics. Camera angles and color palettes similarly

borrowed further underscore the notion that the spectator is viewing a battle between ideologies; two incommensurable worldviews that nevertheless apply the same rhetoric and even same words in their defence.

In this work I explore the staging of power, including the unlikely and implausible staging of the woman who holds out; a rehearsal of power can be understood to be taking place. It can never be understood as a real practice of power. Further, the simultaneous presentation of the competing ideologies on separate screens allows the spectator to enjoy the propagandistic aesthetic that plays out as a rhetorical tug-of-war between the characters. The work is further presented as a staged work, where the set and the studio the work is filmed in remain visible; actors move between sets reminiscent of a theatre play. This forces the spectator to become acutely aware of the rhetorical play that is being staged, along with its detachment from any documentative role. The Brechtian frame neutralizes the seductive power of the characters' language, allowing it to remain as an object of contemplation. However, the thematic of action-inaction that drives much of the characters' political stance forces the audience to confront their own positioning. Perhaps the spectator is driven to ultimately choose between the presented ideologies and declare (at least internally) their own ideology on progress and utopia. In this sense, the work can be interpreted as a choice of two separate call-to-arms that we must answer through the characters' rehearsal of power.

Conclusion

The dialectical ambiguity of images allows them to be taken up for an endless number of politics and artistic agendas. In the case of propaganda art, the reinventing of its semiotic language after its political neutralization has allowed artists to explore its aesthetic while also exploring their own search for power through the autonomous sphere of art. In a world where the image becomes the source of reality, the strength of these artworks lies in their ability to affirm new sociopolitical realities through gestures of power. Languages of power endure not only because of their formal appeal, but also because of their latent power to reshape sociopolitical relationships. Artists do not abandon their persuasive affect. Nevertheless, this reshaping always remains at arm's length, or implausible, opening up a critical space for spectator and artist to enter, independent of political instrumentalization. The artists I have discussed explore not only the aesthetics of propaganda and its power but also its repurposing for new stagings of power, their rehearsals, their confluence and contradictions, as well as their emotional appeal. What remains to be seen is if politics can in turn re-appropriate its historic language of persuasion. If so, will artists be forced to abandon that language at the risk of instrumentalization? The condition of contemporary art practices suggests we can offer a plurality of potentialities with which to play through the lens of the many languages of power available to us.

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