

Art, humour and advertising as tools for political dialogue

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The combination of art, satire, and advertising can create the opportunity for people to suspend momentarily their disbelief, responsibilities, and for a moment, to laugh – and to think. In this context, this melding of media – art and advertising – has the potential to disarm the audience and allow people to see the truths surrounding an issue. This brand of communication can break the ice, so to speak, and allow for new perspectives to surface. For this reason, I am investigating the use of satirical humour, art and advertising as ingredients in the creation of public dialogue.

The content of this presentation reflects that of my current doctoral research. This multidisciplinary research explores the use of conceptual art in the form of satirical medical advertising as a tool to generate public dialogue in Finland, regarding social and political issues. One of the objectives in this work is to present a better understanding of the role that satirical humour and advertising can play in contemporary culture, beyond the promotion of commercial products and services. This presentation will argue that conceptual art, placed within the context of satirical medical advertising not only serves as an act of personal expression, but can generate thought and dialogue that has the potential for social change. To this end, examples within my own art practice and that of other contemporary artists will be discussed.

My doctoral art project will be presented as a multimedia advertisement campaign for a series of fictitious, over-the-counter medications that offer simple treatments for complex conditions involving; economic recession, xenophobia, and weakening of religious faith, among others. One fictitious medication that I've created is a pill called *Ethnixox*®, which may be used to treat symptoms of xenophobia. Another medication called *Consumerin*®, helps stimulate consumer behavior. The advertisements for these medications take the form of posters, brochures, websites, mock pharmacy storefronts and live public sales pitches in shopping malls.

In this project, the format of medical advertising serves as a commentary on the increasingly popular pill-popping approaches for treating a vast array of physical and mental ailments. The satirical, fictitious ads suggest the possibility of an Orwellian future in which pharmaceuticals may serve as the cure for social and political 'ills'.

In the effort to create a public dialogue through art, the following questions and concerns arise:

- 1 Does the advertising format obscure the message behind the art?
- 2 Need the audience be told that such fictitious advertising is an art project?
- 3 In this type of art, to what extent does the use of technology (websites, online discussion etc.) facilitate public dialogue?

Art placed in the public realm must compete with the visual distraction created by other media. The artist must also deal with what the viewer expects to see, which is generally advertising, not art. However, even in a space filled with media and corporate culture, an effective public art piece framed in the context of advertising can serve as a viable public format from which dialogue can begin. As artist Peggy Diggs explains in her essay entitled, *Causing Conversations, Taking Positions*: 'At it's best, an artist's billboard [or advertisement] provides a space where citizens speak to citizens.' (Diggs 1999)



Video still from an advertisement for 'Jesurex', a medication that strengthens one's sense of religious faith.

Reference

Diggs, Peggy. "Causing Conversations, Taking Positions." *Billboard: Art on the Road*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; The MIT Press, 1999.