

# HEIDI WOOD

## LEVEL THREE (HEIDI WOOD'S LOS ANGELES, # 1 - 12)

### **“I’m Mr. Opportunity and I’m knocking”**

An ever greater margin of profit within contemporary capitalism is obtained through the co-optation of human creativity and autonomy, for in a world of increasingly artificial needs, the economy is founded less on producing objects, than on producing subjects to consume those objects. Over the past two decades, it has become abundantly clear that what were formerly art-specific competencies – exemplified by such watchwords as autonomy, flexibility, inventiveness, mobility, creativity, refusal of hierarchy, intrinsic motivation, and so on – have been self-consciously harnessed by managerial rationality, and now describe the ideal-type of the qualified worker of the future as much as they do the artist. French sociologist Pierre-Michel Menger goes so far as to describe contemporary art as “a principle of fermentation for neo-capitalism.” Art, he argues, has ceased to have heuristic value for anything but developing cutting-edge business models, test-driving new modes of production, or analysing the ins and outs of individualised labour relations. Those who persist in critiquing the system head-on inadvertently end up doing it an inestimable service, by pointing out its potential for expansion: criticise fast food and the market rebounds with organics; criticise the over-glorification of youthfulness and you’re only a phone call away from laser vaginal rejuvenation... In short, contemporary capitalism thrives on critique, the more incisive the better.

### **“Our mission is to empower your awareness”**

This, I think, is the fundamental insight behind Heidi Wood’s artistic practice. And this is what makes it so disconcerting when considered from the perspective of the values underpinning the symbolic economy of twentieth-century art. Heidi Wood settles her scores with those values in a stingingly lucid one-liner, juxtaposed with an image of an abstract painting placed above a warehouse loading bay, in the fourth of her Los Angeles photomontages: “Our mission is to empower your awareness.” Awareness empowerment is precisely the self-assigned and perfectly mythical mission to which art continues to cling. Yet if ever art’s self-awareness were empowered, it would have to acknowledge – as Heidi Wood apparently has – that it too has been backed, more or less complacently, into a loading bay, for the delivery of signs to the consumer world’s “constantly moving happiness machines”.

### **“But wait, it gets even better”**

“You have turned people into constantly moving happiness machines”, wrote an admiring President Herbert Hoover in 1928 to Edward Bernays, the man credited with having invented PR and advertising, two forms of what he termed the “engineering of consent”. Bernays also happened to be Sigmund Freud’s nephew – which is quite a coincidence when you think about it. Variouslly dubbed the “Baron of Ballyhoo” and the “Father of Spin”, Bernays was the consummate Angeleno and unselfconsciously candid about his manipulative intent. “If we understand the mechanisms and motives of the group mind, it is now possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it,» he conjectured merrily in *Propaganda*, one of his first books. “The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society,” Bernays wrote, in one of the most shamelessly self-refuting definitions of “democratic society” ever formulated. “Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.... In almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons . . . who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind.” And most of them, he might as well have added, live in Los Angeles.

### **“Common decency...”**

It’s worth delving a little deeper into Bernays’ consumer revolution, if only because it is probably the single most important source of the regime of deceit encompassing the signage and verbiage Wood is hacking into. Instead of targeting purchasers’ practical common sense, as mere product information had previously done, advertising was to embody a message, transforming commodities – however frivolous or trivial – into vectors of symbolic meaning. The point, after all,

was nothing so small time as selling objects; rather, it had everything to do with producing subjects to consume objects – producing consumers who would experience the very act of consumption as giving expression to what Bernays called their “innermost self” – a notion that obviously had considerable significance in his family circle and beyond. Advertising was the instrument through which the commodity acquired the power to produce its consumers, who could in turn be counted upon to validate and promote its symbolic value. It is thus consumers themselves who would henceforth engage in the invisible labour of self-production, providing “subjects for objects”, consumers for commodities. Advertising’s function, in short, was merely to induce within the mind of the consumer a channel for self-production, highlighting branded goods and commodified experiences as the very emblems of their own promotion. And that’s what’s known as California Dreaming... Stretching a point only slightly, one might argue that art stands with respect to advertising as Freud does to his American nephew Bernays. Heidi Wood’s point, at any rate, is that high art is neither other, nor somehow better, than its allegedly crassly commercial cousin; indeed art’s illusion of difference and freedom merely reveals that it too has found its niche group of consumers, who, as Bernays so aptly put it, “don’t actually need what they desire and don’t desire what they actually need.”

### **“Arnold says: ‘California wants your business’”**

Should Heidi Wood’s work be taken at face value, as a sincere acceptance of the design imperatives of cultural capitalism? This seems an unlikely hypothesis, sitting uneasily with her hard-edged work; but it is no more implausible than supposing the work is intended as some sort of tongue-in-cheek send-up of the idiocies of consumer manipulation, if only because trying to outsmart the cynics at their own game is obviously hopeless. Understanding Heidi Wood’s position thus requires that we accept the notion of a third level; neither sincere, nor send up, but on a different map altogether. Like her earlier “Serving Suggestions” series, Wood’s new work is characterized by an exceedingly low coefficient of artistic visibility. By this, I don’t of course mean the work is somehow invisible – it is highly visible, but not necessarily as art, in the sense of autonomously visible objects fitting that description. Thus, Wood’s artistic practice lies as much in infiltrating the ambient semiotic economy of commercial and domestic settings or generic urban landscapes, as it does in actually producing the painterly forms with which she discreetly contaminates those spaces. The drive-by design of her “paintings” themselves is uncannily nondescript: a disk shape surrounded by a semi-circular line against a mauve background, photoshopped onto a billboard along a seedy-looking strip mall, is neither unequivocally vaginal nor certifiably non-vaginal; an icon that isn’t.

### **Spam aesthetics**

As might be expected, Los Angeles – ground zero, so to speak, of the subjectivity-production industry – has left a mark on Wood’s practice. She could scarcely remain indifferent to the quantity of text that fills the city’s visual field, and that formally speaking accounts for the emergence of text in the work she produced there. By adding text, Wood has found a way to integrate the mercantile pragmatics of the urban context as a whole, permeating the otherwise painting-free signscape with painted surfaces. It is worth pointing out that the series itself emerged as spam: that is, before undergoing a shift into the form of rarefied artwork, the series existed in the form of gratuitous excess, cluttering the Inboxes of people like me. The aesthetics of spamming are becoming well known but because the practice has not yet been validated by mainstream artworld values (as the serialised version of hitherto uncommodified mail art), its coefficient of artistic visibility is literally negligible. Day after day, I looked at the perplexing series that seemed to be trying to sell something it didn’t possess to someone who didn’t want it. Beneath each text – less the “subtext” of the images they accompanied than red-herrings – was a commercial signature: © Heidi Wood. What, one wondered, was Heidi Wood? An artist? A visual experience consultant? Post-pop at level three.

**Stephen Wright, 2005**

*Los Angeles Diaries (nutrition disguised as fun)* catalogue