

HEIDI WOOD

OPEN SEASON

The urban environment is like a Petri dish, a crucible in which to chart the enormous transformations that have taken place since the heyday of Western modernism in the early twentieth century. Travel to any major city, from Brussels to Bucharest and beyond, and one finds apartment blocks, government buildings, universities, all kinds of social infrastructure now encased in enormous banners or made over as large-scale billboards advertising watches, perfumes or glamour. Industrial zones that were threatened with obsolescence during the neoliberal 1990s, from port cities such as Gdansk or Hamburg to other manufacturing centres like Kaunas, have been reborn, raised from the dead amid globalised service economies and so-called creative industries to become tourist sites and fun parks of history. These sites then become triggers for consumption, designed to be photographed and replayed later through anecdote rather than experienced there-and-then.

Art, or at least visual culture, plays a central role in this, as Heidi Wood's work suggests. The abstract imagery that has comprised her practice in recent years, including her current series, draws from the ways that state and private businesses distil a sense of their local environments through logos, visual sound bites and other snapshot souvenirs. Wood's symbols or "pictograms" mimic the monuments of modernist industry (cranes, factories, watchtowers), reducing these sites to schematic outlines in much the same way that postcards (or, for that matter, art biennales) tend to reduce a place to key locations or viewpoints for the appreciation of non-local audiences. Artists' residencies – such as that held by Wood in Bremen from September to October 2009, and which has provided the foundations for the work in this exhibition – can be given a similar use-value, infiltrating "local" meaning into a "foreign" artistic practice which can then be disseminated elsewhere around the globe through an artist's subsequent shows. The "local" thereby becomes a mobilised souvenir of sorts as well, much like the blue plates popular in Germany and replicated by Wood here, commemorating a traveller's ventures into new terrain.

The abstractions of Europe's avant-garde and neo-avant-garde movements – from Wassily Kandinsky or Albert Renger-Patzsch to Bernd and Hilla Becher's images of industry on the brink of decay from the 1960s – are now the lingua franca of contemporary consumer society. They provide the signposts for "the local" and "the social", targeting us from hoardings on buildings, or posted to friends with a "wish you were here" glee, as they construct the parameters for contemporary subjectivity. Wood's own pictograms, blue plates and signposts are clearly shot through with a similar debt to "corporatised" creative industries. Yet, rather than a mere repetition of or capitulation to these constructions, Wood's practice can be better understood as an over-identification with them, an aesthetic of mimicry that underpins a significant strain of contemporary art as it seeks new ways of negotiating with neoliberalism. Much like the work of The Yes Men and RTMark today, or IRWIN before them, Wood's practice deliberately exaggerates the processes and appearances of neoliberal aesthetic regimes, opening up the fine line between criticism of that regime and complicity with it, or between an imposed and a sovereign subjectivity. It is in this opened "between" state that Heidi Wood's explorations of contemporary conditions and mnemonics of the present take place, ascribing to no particular political or cultural position other than one belonging to that all-too-rare commodity these days: a deliberate curiosity about the very position of culture, about the messages that it can provide and the people it can target, within neoliberal urban spheres.

Anthony Gardner, 2009
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