

CONNECTED BY IMAGES

The speed at which everyday objects are produced, manufactured, transformed and distributed is such that their equally ephemeral usage annihilates the very idea of the everyday and the familiar. Everything seems organized so that we do not have time to get near these objects and make them our own. Yet they express and represent us in that via our choices and uses they are no more than extensions of our bodies and emotions. If we pay the slightest attention to the things and objects that surround us, all, without exception, can be seen as the reverse side or negative of the forms of our bodies. Shoes, houses, can openers, clothes, bags, cars, chairs – all these things are our own shapes in reverse. Without idolizing consumer society – after all, these are things, not other subjects – we better understand our emotional investment in them when we realize that even the tiniest manipulation is ultimately an interaction with the society of human bodies that these objects represent, contain and reconstruct. They reconstitute us and they signify. The shapes, colors, textures, materials, sizes and weights of all these objects are not insignificant. They are, rather, a form of coded communication with users as well as a means of communication among them. This observation is banal and has been around for a long time. Nonetheless, few people question the rules and norms of this consumer society to the point that a considerable number of objects are often consumed economically without there being time to use them physically – mobile phones are the most common example of this. At best, there is still symbolic usage. At worst, it makes us into social actors who serve the economy, when the market should serve us. Hence, since the birth of industrialization we have progressively become objects for other individuals who see us as such.

The magical, spellbinding, bewitching nature of commodities – what Marx called “commodity fetishism”, from the Portuguese word *feitico*, meaning magic – can only work if we believe in it, like religion. And there is no shortage of commodity worshippers; there are millions of them. This is explained by the double nature of the value attributed to the object, having both a usage value and a symbolic value with the latter often outstripping the object’s mercantile value. We are prepared to spend large sums for a family heirloom or a rare or unusual object. We have a propensity for a sort of “psychic fetishism” toward the object. We are connected to it by emotional over-investment. It also connects us to a whole network of human affective states, codes and signs that have been blurred, are almost imperceptible, but are still there, living on. One of the characteristics of Heidi Wood’s work is to literally make visible the underlying structures, both esthetic and functional, of many of the codifications attached to objects, their contexts and their purposes. Her work not only reveals visual and significant situations that are often unnoticed due to disinterest or conditioning. It is above all transforming. The posters made for the exhibition *Winter Vacation* show objects and their uses in a different light, as if by opening them up and cutting them open to show elements, facets and aspects that would have remained hidden without the various operations undertaken. They signify in another way, but also something else, acquiring other visual, esthetic and artistic values.

The transformation Heidi Wood inflicts upon them comes out of the objects themselves, as if by mutations, evolutions and developments – what visual communication jargon calls multiple spin-offs. Playing on ambivalences in the way the public receives advertisements, design objects, graphics and a whole range of signs, as well as ambivalences in the modes of production, design and manufacture of this vast system of codes, Heidi Wood does more than shift their signification and purpose. Ultimately, she resocializes an entire process of significations that originally would have consisted of desocializing, all to facilitate their circulation in the commodities system. In the end, the thousands of signs we read and interpret daily in the form of all types of objects – except those that are strictly informative – only serve to attract and focus attention on something else, which is usually the sale... of other objects. The billboards we find here and there in the street always possess, literally and figuratively, a double discourse: informative and mercantile. As if we could not signify, communicate and inform without immediately soliciting the viewer with an eye to the future sale of a given product. We deliberately omit the fact that not all communication has an alternative motive. It is not always manipulation. Suddenly, the street, avenue, square, church, house, roundabout, pharmacy, fire station or hospital can all become, or already are, commercial signs. Society as a whole becomes a hyper-logo, a sign of itself like a system of commodification that self-generates other signs and logos.

If, based on the system of existing symbols, Heidi Wood repossesses, redraws, reconfigures and duplicates, we have to take her posters literally as symbols and symbolic, i.e. as two things that are joined or brought together (from the Greek *symbolon*, “put together”). In other words, a social connection is established between the person who imagines and produces the sign and those who perceive and interpret it. Given that a symbol only has meaning if it is understood and shared by a group, community or society, Heidi Wood’s posters are highly symbolic visually, esthetically and artistically, but also symbolically in that they create recognizable signs among members of society, creating connections between people who recognize themselves as subjects rather than interchangeable objects. Always working with the specificity of place, Heidi Wood clearly uses a generic system of signs, fitting it into local peculiarities so that the works are significant to the users addressed. In this case, the users are inhabitants of Chevilly-Larue who should see themselves in and feel partly reflected by them. The negative or positive surprises, or even loathing that Heidi Wood’s posters may spark are another way of creating connections with users of the urban landscape, not only in that they see their usual environment from another, surprising angle, but because they therefore understand that a different form of social participation is possible, that another way of seeing is viable, that another form of imagination can materialize in society. Public space is never a given that can be handled like any other tool. It is not something within arm’s reach whose only value is utilitarian; that can be tossed out when it is deemed obsolete. In a manner that is as surreptitious as it is explicit and visible, Heidi Wood’s works prove that public space is constantly constructed by those who make, use, think and shape society. The idea of shaping it should be taken as the form given to the space and the audience of this space – a space where signs and images weave connections rather than undermining the social fabric.

Jacinto Lageira, 2011

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