

Commentary: Art and Pedagogy in the Age of Neo-Liberal Globalization

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*"In this new globalized context, the victories of identity politics have amounted to a rearranging of the furniture while the house burned down."
(Klein, 2000, p. 123)*

In 1985, the year that *America Online* was founded and Ronald Reagan was sworn in for his second term in office, Jessie Lovano-Kerr wrote that "Isolation is no longer feasible. Interdependence is inevitable. Human issues are now global issues" (p. 25). These McLuhanesque aphorisms, made more than a decade before the widespread adoption and convergence of digital and communication technologies, aptly describe important aspects of our contemporary global network society. Lovano-Kerr went on to argue that the rapid increase of ethnic and cultural diversity in countries like the United States necessitated an education that could prepare students for "global interdependence" (p. 25). She rightly challenged art educators to "examine our current practices to determine whether we are using limited frames of reference" (p. 25).

But while Lovano-Kerr accurately identified ways in which electronic media and global migration had "greatly accelerated global connectedness" (p. 25), her thesis didn't sufficiently account for the powerful economic and ideological forces that were driving us towards a globalized world. More specifically, what Lovano-Kerr failed to adequately acknowledge—in fact what most of her contemporaries failed to adequately acknowledge—were the intimate economic connections between diversity, neo-liberal globalization, and the inequitable (re)distribution of global wealth. In particular, her article overlooked the dramatic expansion of free-market capitalism that was taking place in the United Kingdom under Margaret Thatcher and in the United States under the banner of Reaganomics, including the privatization of publicly owned utilities and resources, the deregulation of financial markets, the undermining of trade unions, and the expansion of free-trade agreements (Klein, 2007).

Looking back with the advantage of hindsight, Lovano-Kerr's own "limited frames of reference" are not surprising given the ethos of the times in which she was writing. As Klein (2000) argues, the "radical foundations of the women's and civil-rights movements were replaced in the 1980s and 1990s with a "politics of image, not action" (p. 124). She contends that while they were busy fighting wars of representation, too many activists and scholars ignored larger issues of economics, production, and ownership. This resulted, for instance, in social justice campaigns that rallied for more members of underrepresented populations

to be included in network television programming while at the same time completely ignoring the rapid consolidation of ownership and decreasing info-diversity in those same media and cultural industries. It also meant buying up "Girls Rule" T-shirts and Nike running shoes to promote female equality and young girl's empowerment through sports while simultaneously disregarding the young girls in Asia and Latin America who were sweating in factories for pennies per hour to produce these supposed emblems of equity and emancipation. As Klein poignantly articulates, "We were too busy analyzing the pictures being projected on the wall to notice that the wall itself had been sold" (p. 124).

ARTFUL CRITIQUES OF NEO-LIBERAL GLOBALIZATION

Fast-forward to a November 2006 conference on business in Africa sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business. Alleged World Trade Organization (WTO) representative Hanniford Schmidt announced a new initiative to establish an official system of corporate-sponsored slavery for the continent (Hood, 2006). Describing the WTO's plans to require western companies operating in Africa to "own their workers outright," Schmidt explained this initiative would bring the private ownership model applied to "transport, power, water, traditional knowledge, and even the human genome" to people (Hood, 2006).

Citing the west's 500-year history of free trade with Africa, including the three phases of slavery, colonialism, and post-colonial markets, Schmidt argued that Africa's steadily deepening poverty could be reversed (while also increasing profits for business) through his free-market scheme to "(re)privatize humans themselves" (GATT, 2006). To illustrate that his human stewardry model could work, Schmidt referred to a proposal by the free-market think tank the International Policy Network (IPN) to save whales by selling them (Okonski & Stagnaro, 2003). He explained "Those who don't like whaling can purchase rights to specific whales or groups of whales in order to stop those particular whales from getting whaled as much" (GATT, 2006). Schmidt further argued that much like IPN's plan for saving the whales, the "market in Third-World humans will 'empower' caring First Worlders to help them out" (GATT, 2006).

Amazingly, rather than drawing criticism and outrage, Schmidt's call for "compassionate slavery," was politely received by the audience. Session attendees even seemed unfazed by Schmidt's personal African steward who stood nearby "at respectful attention off to one side" throughout the panel presentation (GATT, 2006). In fact, of the 150 delegates and panelists present at the 75-minute panel entitled "Trade in Africa: Enhancing Relationships to Improve Net Worth," only one attendee publicly took issue with Schmidt's plan, questioning whether employers would have "incentives" to remain as "stewards" after their employees were too ill or elderly to work (GATT, 2006). Dr. Laurie Agama, the director of African affairs at the Office of the U.S. Trade representative (USTR), whose presentation directly followed Schmidt's talk, reportedly prefaced her remarks by thanking Schmidt for "his macroscopic perspective," saying that "the USTR view adds details to the WTO's general approach" (GATT, 2006).

It was only sometime after the presentation that Wharton School of Business members discovered they had fallen victim to a hoax perpetrated by the performance artists the *Yes Men* (Hood, 2006). Invited to speak at the conference by organizers via a counterfeit WTO website (<http://gatt.org>), the Yes Men enacted a trope they describe as "identity correction," a culture jamming tactic in which members impersonate powerful officials and

spokespersons of corporations and governmental organizations. By earnestly presenting their bogus proposal for corporate slavery to attendees, the group exposed the gullibility of both conference organizers and delegates.

More poignantly, however, the Yes Men's performance artfully revealed the degree to which the logic of neo-liberal capitalism has been internalized by our business and governmental leaders. In other words, the Yes Men cleverly demonstrated how, for those operating under the pure logic of a free enterprise system, a proposal to commodify human beings could easily be understood as a commonsense solution to alleviating human poverty and suffering. In this sense, Schmidt's proposal to have corporations enslave their workers became a logical extension of our ownership society.

In so doing, the Yes Men's fictive WTO performance cleverly exposed the tacit connections between global capitalism and slavery by underscoring their intrinsic bonds. As Hardt and Negri (2001) explain, capitalism's *ideology* might be antithetical to the concept of slavery but its actual *relationship* with indentured labor is far more intimate and complex. They describe colonial capitalism as not only subsuming and strengthening slavery throughout the world but also a key force for establishing new structures of slavery on an unparalleled scale, particularly in the Americas. They argue that "slavery and servitude can be perfectly compatible with capitalist production" (p. 122), pointing to the fact that slavery was not abolished in the western world *because* of economic forces but *despite* them.

WATCH AND LEARN: LESSONS OF DESIGNER CAPITALISM

Set within the backdrop of economic globalization, the Yes Men's artful critique of neo-liberalism, or what some conservatives euphemistically call "compassionate conservatism" (Olasky, 2000), exists in stark contrast to the forceful ideological *lessons* about freedom and democracy provided by global capitalism and embedded in our visual culture. Giroux (2004) describes this as a "transnational public pedagogy" and argues the educational influence of dominant culture "spreads the values, ideologies, and social relations that define global citizenship as a private affair, a solitary act of consumption" (p. 52). Clearly one of the key ideological lessons taught by the neo-liberal project is that free-market capitalism is inseparable from democracy and freedom. This tenet is central to the increasingly unregulated flow of capital and commodities across national borders and is directly connected to the rationales made for post-911 adventures in U.S. military interventionism (Mitchell, 2005).

Such forms of public pedagogy have intensified in recent years with the global expansion of digital media, a burgeoning visual culture, and the corresponding confluence of the political and cultural spheres (Darts, 2007). Accordingly, the mainstream media and popular culture now have assumed an unparalleled importance in shaping the values, norms, and ideologies necessary for supporting the structures and imperatives of global capitalism—or what Jagodzinski (2007) labels "designer capitalism" (p. 342). In this article, he uses the concept of designer water—which he explains is impossible under blind test conditions to differentiate from bottled tap water—to illustrate the fantasies and desires created for and required by designer capitalism to function (p. 346). He compares the marketing of designer water to the peddling of snake oil and argues that it is the "signs and their significations" surrounding designer water, and not the product itself, that ultimately makes it sell (p. 346).

Thus designer water serves as a useful metaphor for understanding designer capitalism, which Jagodzinski contends is dependent upon a “steady stream of art and design graduates” (p. 343) who work for the public relations and advertising industries, selling the goods, products, pleasures, and values needed to propel the neo-liberal way of life.

These designer images and messages become teaching tools and sites that are essential for establishing and maintaining key neo-liberal illusions, including the fantasy that infinite economic growth is possible within a finite system of natural resources. Conversely, these pedagogical images and stories also serve to obscure truths that run counter to the neo-liberal agenda, including the fact that the *health* of our current economic system is directly connected to the *sickness* of our planet. And beyond the global environmental costs, designer capitalism’s visual public pedagogy is also profoundly impacting the health of our democracy. As Giroux (2004) argues, the constant onslaught of commercial images and messages further serves to “redefine the very nature of identity, needs, desire, and democracy itself” (p. 56). He explains that this public pedagogy has effectively reduced citizenship to the obligations of consumerism and has helped to establish the increasingly dominant belief that society cannot be significantly improved outside of market forces.

And while the true impact of designer capitalism on the environment, citizenship, and the cultural and political spheres has only recently begun to be fully articulated, the contemporary assault on democracy by economic forces can be traced back through at least the last century. As Alex Carey (1997) points out, the twentieth century was characterized by three developments of profound political importance: “the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy” (p. 18). He argues that one of the most significant propaganda achievements of the twentieth century is the success of corporate propaganda in “persuading us, for so long, that we are free from propaganda” (p. 21). This broad-based corporate-sponsored propaganda campaign continues today and has been made possible largely due to the meteoric rise of the public relations industry, which employs many thousands of our most talented communicators and tacticians and which is now worth well over ten billion dollars per year (Stauber & Rampton, 1995).

The primary site for waging this corporate propaganda campaign has been the mainstream media. In Herman and Chomsky’s (2002) *Manufacturing Consent*, they describe how market forces have shaped a mass media system in which only companies that are geared toward profits and maintaining the status quo will ultimately flourish. In an analysis they call the propaganda model, they outline how this system has created a distorted picture of the world in which stories and images that challenge the dominant economic and political structures of power and influence are systematically marginalized and censored. This assault on info-diversity has been accelerated by the ongoing deregulation of media ownership rules which has placed control of virtually all forms of media and communications in the hands of a select few corporations (McChesney, 2000). Not that the corporate control of communications media should be thought of as separate from neo-liberal globalization itself. As Arundhati Roy (2004) has pointed out, the corporate media doesn’t simply *support* the neo-liberal project, it “*is* the neo-liberal project” (p. 85, italics in the original). This becomes readily apparent when we consider that oligopolies like Time Warner, which merged with *America Online* to become one of the six wealthiest media conglomerates in the world, is valued at considerably more than the annual budget of France (Kingwell, 2000).

ART AND STRATEGIC VISUAL PEDAGOGY

For those of us engaged in contemporary art education, we have a pedagogical and democratic obligation to help our students evaluate how designer capitalism, including the corporate control and manipulation of mainstream media and culture, impacts our perceptions, values, and abilities to obtain and communicate diverse ideas and viewpoints. Helping students understand and ultimately respond to the inequities and contradictions inherent in our current global society requires critical investigations and analyses of how issues of equity and cultural and ethnic diversity are intimately connected to economics, corporate propaganda, visual culture, media ownership, and info-diversity. And while it's beyond the scope of this article to explore, a number of art educators have developed strategies and suggestions for cultivating this type of creative and critical citizenship in the art classroom (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Desai, 2005; Jagodzinski, 2007; Duncum, 2007; Tavin & Hausman, 2004).

I would like to emphasize that these efforts must include what Jagodzinski (2007) describes as a "strategic visual pedagogy" (p. 341). I interpret this as providing students with artistic techniques and strategies for communicating ideas and messages using a wide range of technologies and media—in essence, teaching them to engage in their own forms of public pedagogy. He further highlights the rhetorical/visual/pedagogical techniques used by Al Gore in *An Inconvenient Truth* as an example of strategic visual pedagogy, and to this I would add a number of contemporary artists whose work can help expand our "limited frames of reference" (Lovano-Kerr, p. 25). Like McLuhan (1964), I too believe art can serve as a "Distant Early Warning System" that can be relied upon to "tell the old culture what is beginning to happen to it" (p. 22). The Yes Men's "identity corrections" serve as one such example but there are many others, including the performance artist Bill Talen (also known as Reverend Billy of the Church of Stop Shopping) who performs faux "exorcisms" and "sermons" at numerous big box retail outlets and who cleverly warns in his recent documentary, *What Would Jesus Buy*, that the "Shopacopolypse" is coming (Spurlock, 2007). Ultimately, I feel we would all do well to pay attention to the lessons that contemporary art and artists can teach us—about ourselves and about the global economic, cultural, political, and technological transformations happening right now around us.

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