

//Hansel Sato

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## Furtive, Quiet and Loud

Art and communication practices to deconstruct social codes in the realm of media activism

What happens when the perception of existing visual and symbolic vocabularies is dislocated through artistic and art mediation strategies applying methods of Appropriation Art and Guerrilla Communication? Can these displacement strategies reach an audience outside of the established art system and interact with it? Is this strategy useful for opening up a critical antiracist and feminist perspective? Can it help raise social and political awareness of marginalized minorities?

I will try to answer these questions using examples from several media activism projects that I developed over the past several years in the areas of Guerrilla Communication, Appropriation Art, and artistic intervention in public space. In this article I will discuss how we can create spaces of mediation and direct interaction with the public by using methods that aim at making more transparent the way that social codes are constructed.

In the first part, I will briefly introduce the main ideas of Appropriation Art, Guerrilla Communication, and post-autonomous art, which have fed and nurtured my own praxis. Afterward, I will outline the visibility of such practices in public and media realms in Vienna on the basis of two of my projects. Finally, I will describe how the public reacted to my art projects and to the dialogue for critical reflection of the visibility of sexual and/or ethnic minorities in Austria. \*(1)


### Borrow, recycle, re-semanticize


In the strict sense of the word, one speaks of Appropriation Art when an artist strategically appropriates images, forms, styles, or ideas from another artistic or non-artistic source, and the result of this act of copying can (or is meant to) be perceived as a distinct, new piece of art. These borrowed elements can also be taken from art history or popular culture. In fact, the strategy of appropriation was already used in the Middle Ages in composing music as existing musical works were copied and presented with minor variations. Leonardo da Vinci also used appropriation by utilizing various sources from the fields of biology, mathematics, and engineering, and synthesizing all of these sources into his own art. In modern times, Marcel Duchamp introduced the idea of the *readymade*, putting a urinal on a pedestal, signed as "R. Mutt." The urinal was neither original nor unique. However, Duchamp defended his process of selecting the urinal as a work of art and displayed it in an artistic context. He even used a copy of the *Mona Lisa* in his work *L.H.O.O.Q.* With these readymades, he wanted to involve the viewer in the production of the work of art.

In the following decades, artists have continued using appropriation as a mean to address theories and social issues. The American painter Damian Loeb, for example, uses films to analyze the difference between simulation and reality, while Cory Arcangel integrates nostalgic aspects of mass culture in his art works, such as *Super Mario Clouds* by re-developing old video games and computer programs. Philosophically, these practices are closely related to the conceptual strategies of deconstruction, media theory, and intertextuality. Artistic techniques, such as quotation, allusion, travesty, parody, and pastiche are generally considered features of "postmodern art," however, they can also be found in works of Appropriation Art. Appropriation Art is likewise embedded in the traditions of art movements that actively explore the conditions and limits of art and force the system to redefine

itself. There are other artists who use the appropriation method to make strong political statements in public space, such as the Chilean artist Lotty Rosenfeld. In the 1970s, she appropriated traffic signs by transforming the stripes on the roadways into crosses, in allusion to the crime of genocide of former dictator Augusto Pinochet. \*(2)

### **Guerilleros in the civilization of spectacle**

In the early 1990s, the activists and authors of the “Handbook of the Communication Guerilla”  \*(1) proposed the invention of false facts in order to create real events. They did not focus on artistic facts, however, but rather, social ones. \*(3)


This proposal by Guerrilla Communication was based on Roland Barthes’ affirmation: “Is maybe not the best subversion altering the codes instead of destroying them?” (Barthes 1980: 141)  \*(2) This method aims at uncovering and criticizing mechanisms that are decisive for the production of media images and mediated social realities. As such, guerrilla communication does not directly attack the specific representation of particular topics; instead it plays with the mechanisms that produce socially significant events. By doing so, artistic quality only matters when it promotes efficient subversive political practices. The actions of Guerrilla Communication inhabit the areas of micropolitics as they are aware of their own limitations and do not imagine the great “revolution.” In this sense, guerrilla communication is a defensive model of political practice. Its implementation relies on social and political contexts trying to turn the power structures against themselves. The aim is to question the legitimacy of hegemonic talk that normalize social inequalities, and thus try to open utopian spaces. The two basic strategies used by Guerrilla Communication are alienation and over-identification. The alienation strategy aims at emancipatory changes of representations of habitual things in order to reveal new aspects of the represented, to afford a new reading of habitual events and to produce unforeseen and unexpected meanings. Examples of alienation strategies are the alteration of historical monuments and street names. A group of students at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Austria, changed the name of the square where the Academy is located, (“Schillerplatz”), to “Place of the Jews expelled by the Academy”. \*(4)


Over-identification, the second strategy of guerrilla communication, refers to aspects of daily life that are known by the majority society, but not addressed because of their taboo status. The North American activists Yes Men have supplanted civil servants of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and proposed in conferences to ban the siesta in order to defend the slave trade as a further sector of free trade. Additionally, Yes Men proposed that poor people from “developing countries” should recycle hamburgers already digested by people from the “industrialized countries” to fight hunger. Yes Men argue that they represent the WTO more honestly than the WTO members do themselves. Another example of the strategy of “over-identification” is the action of a group of artists based in Germany in the 1990s who hacked the Lufthansa website and redirected visitors to a website advertising the deportation of refugees to their countries of origin, presented as an ordinary marketing campaign. This action was accompanied by a series of posters called “Deportation Class.”


### **Postautonomous art**

The Argentinian-Mexican theorist Nestor Garcia Canclini argues in his book „La sociedad sin relato“ (2011) that the crucial questions about the role of art cannot be resolved *within* the art circuit itself due to the interdependence of museums, auctions, and artists and major economic, political, and media players. García Canclini proposes artistic actions that dilute the boundary between art and life.

However, he argues that these attempts usually end by reinforcing the difference and reaffirming the uniqueness of art works. The contemporary history of art would be “a paradoxical combination of behaviours to strengthen the independence of the art field and stubbornly trying to destroy the borders that demarcate it” (García

Canclini 2011: 15).  (\*3)

Neither introducing ignoble objects in the museum as Duchamp did, nor leaving the museum or emptying it, or creating intangible works, or omitting the author’s name, or causing censorship or blasphemy will lead to the vanishing of uniqueness. In modernism and postmodernism some ways of producing art works were considered subversive but they have now lost their incendiary character. Museum and white cube visitors have become used to these kinds of subversive actions *inside the art field* and even expect radical gestures, consuming them as just one more product in the global art market. Even world corporations have assimilated this *modus operandi*: there is a marketing strategy called “guerrilla marketing.” Artistic subversions and strategies of guerrilla communication have become a part of “The society of the spectacle” (Debord 1999).  (\*3) As a result, García Canclini suggests the term “post-autonomous art practices”:

With this word I refer to the process of last decades in which displacements from artistic practices based on objects to practices based on contexts have increased, up to managing inserting the works in mass media, urban spaces, digital networks and forms of social participation, where the aesthetic difference seems to disappear. Many works are still shown in museums and biennials, they are still signed by artists and some of them win art prizes, but prizes, museums and biennial, share the diffusion and the consecration with fashion magazines and television. The unique signature, the author’s notion, remains sub-plunged in advertising campaigns, mass media and not artistic groups (García Canclini 2011: 17).  (\*4)

Canclini’s idea of “post-autonomy” does not deny the traditional concept of art, nor does it replace the wish for autonomy that many artists and curators still desire, although the relatively new post-autonomous character is a rising and unstoppable phenomenon. Art is no longer an “uncontaminated” field in which only artists, galleries, museums, and curators play. We can see how they interact with different publics and look for a dialogue with heterogeneous cultures. On the other hand, this post-autonomous condition has intensified in recent years with social networking and the possibility to make online exhibitions and have access to what is done in the great museums, and also in alternative networks that bypass official art institutions. Consequently, this is creating a new dynamics and new forms of innovation and articulation among people from different areas and professions: sociologists and writers have become art curators, artists work in scientific research, people without art education have become performance artists by making interventions in public space, young internet users create films for Youtube and Vimeo, etc.

García Canclini’s reflections are important for my own projects as they give me the decisive impulse to develop projects that make use of the visual language of mass media and at the same time, critically reflect and challenge its dynamics as already proposed by guerrilla communicators. The key questions for my projects are the following:

How can I produce critical artistic reflections in times of visual over-exposition? How can I apply strategies to transgress symbolic orders without being re-assimilated by the art market (or at least not so easily)? How can I thematize racism and sexism from my social position as an artist, a man, and an immigrant living in Europe? How is it possible to successfully interact with a public that does not focus specifically on contemporary art?

In what follows I will describe my projects “Österreichische Nachrichten” (“Austrian News”) and “Männer” (“Men”).

### Project *Österreichische Nachrichten* (Austrian News)



Figure 1: Project „Österreichische Nachrichten“

Together with a small group of people dressed up as news vendors, I distributed 30,000 copies of the *Österreichische Nachrichten* tabloid at underground stations and public spaces in Vienna in the early morning in May 2010 and May 2012 without any legal authorization from the Viennese city hall. I wrote the tabloid and it was actually a fake: I used the same visual language and wording of typical yellow press but “rewrote” the content to infiltrate a political message directed against racism, xenophobia, discrimination, and sexism. By doing so, the project used the methods of artistic appropriation and is embedded in the context of guerrilla communication. Hundreds of people going to work in the morning took the newspaper, thinking that the *Österreichische Nachrichten* was just another free tabloid. However, after reading the newspaper they realized that the *Österreichische Nachrichten* was a persiflage aiming to intervene in mainstream discourses by addressing the politics of exclusion.

The project was supported by *SOHO in Ottakring*, a Viennese art and urban district project, originally founded by an artist’s initiative, and *KÖR. Kunst im öffentlichen Raum Wien*, an institution that supports and finances art in public space. \*(5)

An important starting point for this project was the report “European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia” (EUMC), which stated that in Austria, like in almost all EU countries, people with a “migrant background” are represented predominantly in a negative way in the media, where they are often depicted as infantilized subjects, criminals, or as having beat the system to falsely live off of social benefits. These representations of migrants and the concomitant “strategies of stereotyping” (Hall 1994) (6) are echoed by the Austrian daily newspapers *Heute*, *Österreich*, and the *Kronen Zeitung*, the latter a right-wing populist tabloid with an average daily readership of three million. This number amounts to roughly 40 percent of the daily newspaper readers in Austria, while *Heute* and *Österreich* have the biggest readership in Vienna. Around 30 percent of the people with a higher education living in Austria read these tabloids daily. \*(6)

From my personal experience I can say that it is quite common that people take the information in these tabloids as a given, without questioning the mechanisms of manipulation behind them. As the Argentinian author Veron says, “In our relationship with the mass media, we believe in a speech not because we have found that it is true, we believe in it because we consider it true” (Veron 1987: IV).

(6)

### Mediation and reception of the project *Österreichische Nachrichten*

While distributing the newspapers in the underground stations I talked with many passersby who asked about the editors of the *Österreichische Nachrichten* and if the articles reported on “real facts.”

The reception of the project was positive. Several reviews were published in quality newspapers, such as *Der Standard* and *Die Presse*, and thousands of people visited the website “Austrian News,” posting hundreds of comments in just a few weeks after distribution of the *Österreichische Nachrichten*. Most comments were positive, however, some articles were strongly criticized, because they were — according to some Readers — beyond the limits of good taste or political correctness. Moreover, in June 2012 the Federal Department of Education, Science and Culture forbade me from distributing my newspaper inside their facilities.

On the one hand, these negative comments and reactions made me think about a problematic aspect of my project, namely, the danger of reproducing discriminatory talk in the attempt to criticize it by the use of satire. On the other hand, these critiques missed the point: I was clearly intending to be satirical, and this fact was very well explained in the publication details (Impressum).

### Project *Männer (Men)*



Figure 2: Project „Männer“





Figure 3: Project „Männer“

This poster installation took place in October 2011 and was placed in a masculine-connoted location in Resselpark, Vienna. Homeless men go there to drink and a police station is very close, because it has commonly been used as a place for selling drugs. The project was part of a two-year project financed by the Viennese cultural association *SOHO in Ottakring*, which consisted of conferences and actions

in public space. \*(7) The idea was to break typical role-models related to masculinity and motherhood in a country where women are still overwhelmingly responsible for raising the children and taking care of the household, and still are earning far less money than their male counterparts. \*(8)

I will now offer a few quotes from articles in the press describing the project:

Those pedestrians whose daily path leads to the underground near Vienna's Resselpark will be confronted with posters by the artist Hansel Sato. Sato's posters present a critical argument relating to the representation of men in the mass media, and respond to the incessant repetition of gender-stereotyping of the inconspicuous life of a man. On the other hand, the posters aim to address people who have no experience in dealing with the topic of gender. For attaining this goal, popular public places are used as a display. "Men" is organized within the framework of the art festival Soho in Ottakring and is a part of the "Regendering Media" Project. (Der Standard 2012)  (\*12)

At first glance one believes that the pictures on the posters ... show a breast-feeding man. In the pictures, a roughly thirty-year-old man is seen wearing casual clothes, and sporting a dark beard, sitting on the edge of a bed with flowery bedding, holding a small child in his arms. Each poster has a different slogan in connection with the subject, thus causing a stir. (Heute 2012)  (\*13)

## Mediation and reception

A few of my Austrian friends stood beside this installation for several hours per week and talked with the passersby. Sometimes I was there, too, however I did not want to show my face, because I am the man depicted in the pictures with the baby, and the people probably would not say what they really thought if they realized that I was the author of the project.

The project was given positive feedback in the media, but on the websites of the tabloid *Heute* and the newspaper *Der Standard*, the negative opinions were overwhelming. However, the most negative reactions were expressed by destroying a poster stand and writing obscene statements on the posters, such as "Where are the tits?" (see figure 2). The negative comments illustrate the conservative approach towards the role of men and women in Austria, which is still defended by many people in our allegedly enlightened post-industrial society. Moreover, it reflects the fact that we are currently experiencing a dangerous rebirth of movements in European countries that are based on reactionary ideologies, which deny the major historical achievements of feminist (and other) social movements. The more striking examples of the rise of conservative and even reactionary ideologies are the huge protests against gay rights in France and the new, restrictive abortion law in Spain in 2013.

The reactions to this project as well as to the project *Österreichische Nachrichten* has led me to inquire into the importance of emotion in public spaces, which I will address in my concluding remarks.

## Concluding remarks

We learn from our daily experience that what happens in the realm of politics is not usually dominated by rationality. The philosopher Spinoza has already argued that reason alone is incapable of motivating human action; affect and passion are required. Politics and emotion are not counterparts, on the contrary: Emotions have the great potential to effect the public sphere, when people share their experiences and seek to achieve a common political goal. It is questionable to think that emotion

always distorts the supposed aseptic rationality of politics (moreover, when we analyze human history, this asepsis does not exist). Emotions are another form of knowledge and it is necessary to embrace them as a constitutive and necessary part of any politics, including cultural politics. As a result, an important question for artists dealing with social and political issues is: How we can produce an artistic work that strongly appeals to emotions, without losing the ethical component? We should not forget that fascists and right-wing populists use the same strategy as they manipulate people with a strongly emotional visual vocabulary.

As we know, sensationalist tabloids and market strategists use a visual language that appeals to emotions in order to sell and practice (malicious) politics. They do not seek to promote analytical thinking, but rather, affective reactions: fear of foreigners in the case of tabloids, fear of losing economic status, in the case of modern neoliberal campaigns.

The aim of these projects was to adopt a similar strategy by generating an initial emotion (fear or surprise) in order to hook the random reader or pedestrian. Nevertheless, the intention was not to leave people in a state of panic or surprise, but to allow them to uncover the deception. My hypothesis is that humor, parody, and *reductio ab absurdum* are capable of initiating a process allowing people to achieve the necessary distance for reaching a meta-level of reflection that will ultimately help them move away from the emotional level, in order to begin thinking about the mechanisms of social manipulation.

Another great advantage of using the same visual language as mass media and publicity was that people approached the art works voluntarily, without rejecting them as “leftist ideology” or moralizing.

Finally, these interventions did not seek to produce “just” an artistic action in public space: They did not aim to attack the elitist art system or the white cube, enhance a place, attract tourism, decorate a place, or make political propaganda. Instead, they aimed to open up other forms of thinking about social issues for casual passersby on the streets. Their (potential) value is not situated in the works themselves, but in the interaction they establish with the public, and in the recipients’ different interpretations of them. They are relational but not in the sense of aiming to “fix” social problems by establishing a harmonious and pleasant dialogue with different people or looking for a peaceful multicultural connivance. The goal was to address the contradictions of our contemporary society plagued by uncertainty and the fear of “the Other” and give visibility to these shared feelings in the public sphere.

## //Zur Person

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Hansel Sato

Geboren in Peru, studierte Hansel Sato Malerei und Grafik in Lima. Vor zwölf Jahren kam Sato mit einem UNESCO-Aschenberg-Stipendium nach Österreich, wo er seinen Studienabschluss an der Akademie der bildenden Künste in Wien bei Franz Graf machte. Sato beschäftigt sich insbesondere mit den Themen Transkulturalität, Migration und die Konstruktion des post-migrantischen Subjekts in Europa. Zurzeit ist er Ko-Leiter des interdisziplinären Universitätslehrgangs für Höhere Lateinamerika Studien des Lateinamerika-Instituts in Wien.

Infos zu Projekten unter:

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<http://bleibefuehrerinwien.blogspot.co.at/p/about.html>  
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## //Fussnoten

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- \* 1 *see also: <http://wien.orf.at/stories/441358/> and <http://diestandard.at/1317019799614/Regendering-Media-Maenner-einmal-anders>*
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