

# 7. Werkleitz Biennale

## *Happy Believers*

### 06.–10.09.2006

### Volkspark Halle (Saale)

#### Festival Program Exhibition

Catalog Texts  
Exhibition Floor

#### Participants Concept Service



german version

#### Catalog Texts

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#### **Belief Systems among Media, Market, and Humanity**

Anke Hoffmann

#### **Omnipresence and (Im)Mortality**

Pope John Paul II, who died last year, became known as the first media pope. He used the public stage of the media with so much savvy to communicate the message of the Catholic Church that he himself became an icon of the media world. His omnipresence in public produced a simultaneity of emphatic experience for all believers. In their most recent work, *Für ein Leben nach dem Tod* (For a Life after Death, 2006), the artist duo Korpys/Löffler accompanied the pope with a camera at all public appearances in Rome during the last year of his life. During their stay at Villa Massimo, they had themselves accredited as journalists in order to follow the official events of the Roman Catholic Church from the places reserved for reporters. Among CNN, BBC, and France2, the artists filmed the material for their seventy-five minute film.

The filmic work, formally speaking a documentary, is a complete composition of image, sound, dramaturgy, and editing, which because of (or despite) its repetitive rhythm develops a visual fascination all its own. Following the religious cultural performances, Andrée Korpys and Markus Löffler attended masses, audiences, and public blessings where not only the opulently outfitted choreographies around the head of the Catholic Church could be observed, where he figured as a martyr in the succession of Christ, but also the extras of the show: journalists, bodyguards, and police. Over and over, dark suits move into the image, outfitted with cameras and mobile phones, little cogs in the system of a media event controlled by the Vatican. All the participants – the cardinals adjusting the tablecloth, the media professionals breathlessly reporting on the events, or the stoic presence of the security personnel – are united in producing a never-ending Catholic

visual medley that broadcasts the holiness of the Papal figure millions of times through television screens into the world's houses and huts. The artists direct their focus on the media apparatus of missionisation and the representative structures of power and authority, practices of marketing and event creation. In doing so, the intimacy of suffering that is communicated as a horizon of experience is refracted in its supposed immediacy.

What remains is our knowledge of the end as a global media event:

“He [Johannes Paul II.] understood that not only do the media requires images, but the people ... have emotional needs. The story provided by the media ultimately climaxes in the representation of the suffering and death of an approachable pope... At the death of the pope, the ‘currency of emotion’ revealed its buying power... the collective exchange of feelings before and behind the camera.”<sup>1</sup> Even after his death, Karol Wojtyla remained a media star when in the virtual presence of millions around the world he was carried across St. Peter’s Square in papal robes. He opened the gates of the Vatican to the mass media, and they opened the gates to immortality for him: for a life after death.

#### **aide moi o media<sup>2</sup>**

In Erik Bünger’s most recent video work *Gospels* (2006), created especially for the biennial, we are surprised by scenes of veritable glorification and adoration. We encounter men and women, individually in sequence, intoning a canon of adoration for an imaginary person. Their reports all attest to HIS generosity, HIS character, and HIS wisdom. Their total focus on and praise of HIM is presented without any illustrative context that would help the viewer to understand. Their reports trigger a many-voiced gospel song full of emotion and gratitude that lies at the basis of a common experience.

Those questioned are not unknown to us, but themselves people we honour, praise, and glorify: Hollywood actors like Meryl Streep, Dustin Hofman, or Drew Barrymore. We consider them as idols of a better life, their film characters stand for the successful mastering of problems and catastrophes in life, and in turn colour our image of the actors themselves. They are our models, heroes, and beauty queens. As a product of a glamour and glory industry, they are creations worthy of adoration: we would like to lick the words off their lips. But what they actually say is rarely the issue.

Our departing from our own ego in adoring the surfaces of the media world caused the

Swedish artist Erik Bünger to sample a montage of object-less adoration from the countless 'making of' interviews that can be found as bonus material on DVDs of film releases. The personality cult around stars from music, film, and popular culture has become something everyday: media-staged figures of salvation in the modern world. The interweaving of sacred symbols into film and television entertainment and the appropriation of religious language represents the context of media practices of staging, placing the symbiosis of religious culture and the worldly work of conviction as well as the question of religiosity in a new light: What is religion? Who and what fulfils religious needs? How is life meaning communicated?

"Film has never stood in a sacred context," Boris Groys writes. He founds his denial of the holiness of the film medium on the fact that its invention took place too late in the day; our culture, according to Groys, had already granted its potential for sacralisation to painting, sculpture, and architecture, to theatre and opera as forms of expression.<sup>3</sup> But despite the obviously profane nature of commercial, media visual culture, film and television entertainment have indeed achieved quasi-religious functions:<sup>4</sup> with their narratives about live, love, and death, they become models for the viewers to plan their own life and creation of meaning – and with them, their protagonists.

### **The Word, its Appropriation, and Double Standards**

The great religions are rooted in millennia of preaching the 'revealed word', from which ethical norms for all persons and rules for behaviour for society can be deduced. The 'revealed word' and the norms derived from it also open a historically determined space for interpretation and negotiation. This offer of ambiguities conceals also a danger:

"Because religiosity has to do with final horizons, all religious interpretation of reality is always founded on the tendency towards self-isolation, absolutisation, totalisation"<sup>5</sup>

"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain", reads the sixth commandment in the Book of Exodus.

Taking the name of God in vain is the topic of *Double Bubble* (2001), a video work by Maja Bajevic. The artist stages herself in various poses as a self-confident narrator of usually male-connoted excuses for their own acts: "I free people from sins. They give me money. Everything has its price"; "I always preprogramme my arms on fridays. On saturdays I don't do anything"; "I shot 55 people during prayer, in the name of God"; "I

only collaborate. That's all I do. God is my witness."

In self-righteous recourse to religious dogmas from Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the interpretations are depicted as self-serving, a loss of ego, and a disdain for humanity. The artistic moment of doubling the spoken text, like an echo, amplifies our perception of the statements as a double standard or hypocrisy. The verbal violation of creeds contains the rotting pustules of nationalisms, fundamentalism, and neo-totalitarianism of a religious bent.

Maja Bajevic comes from Sarajevo; a city where some residents did not survive the outgrowths of religiously founded nationalisms. Lies and hypocrisy, demagoguery and violence are what the artist seeks to expose as contradictions and violations of religious feeling. With all forms of re-interpretation of revelations to extremism, questions also emerge on whether the absolutisations themselves are not already contained in the written 'word' itself: "Does not the 'name of the Lord' and his revealed word stand exclusively for the good, while 'evil' is humanity which in pursuing its bad intents deforms and perverts this 'absolute good'? Or does the name of the Lord, the revealed divine will, not already contain the roots of its dominant application in itself, so that the accusation of abuse can be seen as a distracting ex-post-facto manoeuvre?"<sup>6</sup>

### **Utopia on Sale**

The works of the British artist Carey Young revolve around the rules of value production in market economies, corporate strategies, and questions of property in commercial systems. In *I Am a Revolutionary* from 2001, Carey Young treats the profane aestheticisation of social utopias. In the video work, we follow the same scene over and over again: Carey Young, in a business suit, finds herself in a rabbit-cage-like office with panoptic views inside and out in a glass courtyard. A rhetoric coach trains Young to practice intoning a single sentence that can be seen as part of a speech: "I am a revolutionary". She repeats the sentence incessantly, is corrected, and tries again to infuse "I am a revolutionary" with believability and conviction. But she is just not able to animate the radical political position with the passion that was once inhabited. The slogan of the revolution has long become a commodity, an object of globalised marketing strategies, for selling T-shirts, sneakers, and home electronics. The appropriation of social utopias and radical plans in the advertising rhetoric of popular and consumer culture degrades the repeated

profession to a farce – and thus the potential of a political avant-garde, whose wings are cut because even their system-critical attributes become luxury articles: punk is now called Gucci and Greenpeace is Bitburger. By adopting social commitment and the trophy collection of future-critical staff as a sign of prestige, companies raise their value of identification with the desired clientele: for example, the jeans company Diesel advertised with casted demonstrations and idealistic collectives that can hardly be surpassed in their superficiality.

We are left unsure whether the artist Young with her endless attempts to incorporate the statement with true belief is in fact hoping for a rediscovery of the cultural and political potential of dissent and its ideas of transformation.

### **Words of Salvation from the Machine?**

In his work *Intelligence* (2005), the British-Australian artist and curator Richard Grayson treats modern technology as a system of belief charged with emotion and promises of redemption. The visions that are today linked to the achievements of technology are characterised by the power of omniscience, the promise of dominating nature and being able to ward off all perils.

Grayson presents a curious collection of astrological horoscopes for political figures involved in the Iraq War and the "War against Terror": Condoleezza Rice, George W. Bush, Tony Blair, Saddam Hussein, and Osama bin Laden. The luminary constellations drawn by Grayson in painstaking detail are based on computer-generated – and thus preprogrammed – material from the Internet. The computer programme<sup>7</sup> combines and arranges the positions of the planets according to prepared text elements. The result is supposed to represent a "cartography" of the most inner motivations and psychic potentials of a person, with sentences like: "Your enthusiasm is so strong it can sometimes be a little too much, making others uncomfortable." Astrology is generally not a science, but is commonly understood as science's predecessor, a pioneer of astronomy with its origins in the Arab world. As a pseudo-science, astrology in the West is particularly widespread in the Internet, where many "enlightened" individualists apply the predictions to their own life planning. Technologically programmed future predictions from the World Wide Web thus find their way into popular systems of interpretation and belief.

As Grayson puts it, "To conflate astrology with the approaches and technologies of

modern intelligence gathering and welfare, illuminates the emotional and symbolic loadings that we place science and technology<sup>8</sup>... The work articulates the element of desire that lies in the idea of 'intelligence' (and in the dreams of the technological): that it represents a desire for a system to exist by which the random and the un-anticipatable may be narratised and understood, and so prevent the unexpected and the terrifying from taking place. ... The same desire is expressed in a belief in the forces of the planets and stars upon people and their lives that is systematised in astrology."

Both systems of cognition, that of rational technology and irrational esoterics, claim to influence the future and promise to help us to avoid unknown perils.<sup>9</sup> Are technological developments the saviours of our times? Is belief in our capacity to solve problems unbroken? Do we expect paradisiacal conditions if technology and science could finally develop to their fullest?

### **The Holy and the Profane**

Paradise stands for a distant site of fulfilment and bliss, a site of exoticism and mysticism that can never be reached, and is thus an eternal ideal and an object of the longing for complete satisfaction. Paradise in religions is the otherworldly place of the soul at peace, where all our aspirations dissolve in the endlessness of fulfilled longings.

Miguel Rothschild's *Paradies* [Paradise] (2004) consists of shampoo, orange juice, ice cream, sweets, book titles, and tourist destinations. In three photographic installations, the Argentine artist has assembled dozens of brand name items, magazine covers, and book covers all bearing the word "paradise" into an assemblage. On the surface, Rothschild here imitated the lead glass windows from the High Middle Ages with their allegories from the Christian visual tradition, in particular be found in Gothic cathedral buildings. Capitalism as religion? What the artist represents playfully and with irony are on the one hand the messages of the consumer industry, which instead of just selling a shampoo style their products into genuine bringers of salvation, because they help to meet the right man (shampoo), provide health to our life's end (orange juice) or unsuspected trancelike feelings of happiness (ice cream). Or we buy a ticket and fly to paradisiacal South Africa, New Zealand, or Bora Bora (and never really want to get back to real life). We don't buy products, but promises, promises of salvation. Advertising and the consumer industry operate with our yearnings, the

insatiable longing for happiness or satisfaction. But satisfaction simply will not kick in, the diffuse state of fulfilment remains: "The longing of humans is always directed to something that cannot be named. And that's why we have to buy buy buy."<sup>10</sup> Against the "disenchantment of the world," the brand-name "paradise" is used for the earthly kind of seduction, seduction for consumption. But this seduction does not culminate in salvation, but debt. Debt and guilt are linked emblematically in the worldly (consumer) paradise and religious paradise: in the Christian narrative of morality, Adam and Eve were driven from paradise because they were guilty, because they were not able to resist temptation. "Capitalism could not have replaced Christianity if it were not essentially Christian, religious in essence, as a cult religion and religion of guilt directed towards the replenishment of a lack. The Christian thing about capitalism and the capitalist thing about Christianity is the parasitic relationship to guilt." <sup>11</sup>

According to Christian teaching, the guilty can be freed of their sin in the sacrament of penance. In modern times, the confession as an act of reconciliation has been replaced by front pages and talk shows, where the degree of intimacy presented usually surpasses the threshold of tolerance. The exposure of individual errors of judgment in public is booming. Those more given to introverted practices of reflection go to the sofa of a psychotherapist – or create their own, quite private religious acts from the most various sources spiritual models for explaining the world, the exchange of between cultures has been significantly promoted by migration, media, and mobility.

### **The Praying Project**

Prayer is a central activity in many religions. It emblematises communication with the divine and mental investment in a promise of salvation. Prayer as a spiritual practice was the object of the *Praying Project*, initiated by Papo Colo, an artist and co-founder of Exit Art, an independent, private art institution in New York. In April 2005, Papo Colo and Jeannette Ingberman invited performance artists from Trickster Theatre Group to develop their private notions of spiritual rituals, and to present them in public, in a collective performance – contrary to the true tradition of prayer. For three days twenty-one selected performances were simultaneously presented in the eight windows of the gallery, some lasting a half-hour, others even six hours. There could not have been a greater

variety of performances, and this reflected the greater leeway of the pluralised religious lifeworlds with its individual rituals. The initiators described the action as one of the most impressive and strongest actions in the twenty-five year history of Exit Art. The background for the event was the new status of religiosity and religion in Bush's America, which in its politically motivated Christian rhetoric of morality and liberty has developed an excluding tone. Exit Art sought to oppose this with a private response, where the current need for spirituality is explored and given sociocultural expression space and a voice. As could be read in the gallery flyer, "Prayer is an action with purpose, an intimate expression that is beneficial and constructive. Praying is maybe the most intimate and profound freedom of expression. Discover your own way of praying - private, public, intense, sublime, vulnerable and powerful."

### **Mythology and Modernity**

Monika Oechsler's video work, produced for Werkleitz Biennial, *There Is Only One Life* (2006), explores our modern lifeworld in the reflection of spiritual and philosophical ideas. The filmic work takes the currently observable reenchantment by religious and mythical concepts as a starting point to illuminate the spiritual search for meaning of the consumer society beyond traditional denominations and doctrines. Comparable to popular psychology, alternative systems of belief also function as methods of self valorization, and are in demand as such. The artist takes recourse to myths of cabbala teachings, a tradition of belief that has its origins in the writings of Judaism, and which since the beginning of the twentieth century has spread through occult circles, esoteric currents, and New Age movements, becoming popular. At the centre of the artistic work is a pictorial novel, *Promethea* by Alan Moore. The novel in the form of a science-fiction comic combines a scientifically dominated perspective with the myths of the cabbala. Promethea, the central female novel figure, is represented in her four various incarnations by four actresses. The textual fragments consist of arrangements of fictional references from the narrative *Promethea*, texts by the English poet William Blake, and song lyrics from the bands Verve and Radiohead. The figures are set in the mythology of a popular world religion searching for meaning in locations in current London: the business landscape of the Canary Wharf, a tube station in the middle of the city, and the historical Abney Cemetery. *There Is Only One Life* opposes various

dialogues, monologues, and showplaces in a temporal historical sampling to the female characters (Promethea), who themselves stand for references from antiquity, classicism, and modernity. In the combination of philosophical ideas, spiritual consciousness, poetic world explanation, and fictional figures, the symbiotic connections of the most various influences from mythology, religious culture, and superstitions are visualised, where the wish for enchantment, identity, and transcendence is equally expressed.

Translated from the German original.

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1 Katrin Döveling: *Feel the Pain*, in: *ästhetik & Kommunikation* 131, 2005, p. 98.

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2 Title of a work by Ecke Bonk, 1986/96. The French palindrome, that can be read forwards and backwards, articulates a cry for help to the media, and at the same time parodying the media as bringers of salvation.

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3 Boris Groys, *Iconoclasm as an Artistic Device / Iconoclastic Strategies in Film, Iconoclasm*. Karlsruhe 2002, p. 282.

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4 See also Jörg Herrmann: *Medienreligion unplugged*, in: *ästhetik&Kommunikation*, 131, 2005, p. 19.

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5 F.W. Graf: *Die Wiederkehr der Götter*, Bonn 2004, p. 208.

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6 Hartmut Krauss: *Missbrauch und/oder konsequente Radikalisierung des Religiösen?*, in: *Die Zehn Gebote*, Dresden 2004, p. 86

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7 For example, Indira or Merlin

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8 For example, by the CIA, the Central *Intelligence Agency*: which refers to the title of the work, *Intelligence*.

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9 Hollywood explores this fusion for example in the science fiction thriller *Minority Report* (2002), in which so-called 'precogs' – media held in an artificial trance – are presented as future reading blockers of violence.

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10 Norbert Bolz: *Das konsumistische Manifest*, 2002, p. 99

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11 Werner Hamacher: "Schuldgeschichte",  
in: *Kapitalismus als Religion*, ed. D.  
Baecker, 2004, p. 88

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