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Satirical Medical Advertising as a Tool for Political Dialogue

Medicine and Art

The medical now finds itself at the core of work created by a growing number of contemporary artists. Justine Cooper satirizes the eternal quest for happiness by creating a new medication that promises the perfect life. Dana Wyse, in her collection of pills, suggests that we can make a significant change in our lives – instantly. Damien Hirst, in his pharmaceutical installation and paintings, raises questions about the nature of belief in large corporations and to a degree, the growing faith in contemporary society for pharmaceutical drugs to ease our physical and psychological ailments. Kaisu Koski points out that this artistic activity originates from a desire to increase the visibility of the mechanisms and democracy of the medical domain. In the process, this artwork often raises questions about the power relationships and limitations in current medical practices (Koski 1). Ultimately, the artist is not obligated to present a solution to pathological and biomedical dilemmas. Instead, as Broderick notes, arts practices can introduce a discursive space that can offer critique and commentary about the relationship between society and medicine (Broderick 3).

My artistic research operates within the code of the aforementioned medical themes. Using a combination of representational and interventionist performance and methods, the work presents a satire of the over-medicalization of everyday life, specifically the increasing reliance on pill treatments for our ailments. I choose to situate my artwork within the medical realm because I believe that the language associated with this industry is now familiar to us on a personal and global level. Doctor's prescriptions and pharmacy visits have a place in one's daily existence. Direct-to-consumer medical advertising takes on an increasingly international presence within the media landscape. Our closeness to the pharmaceutical reveals our urgent desire for instant relief from ailments, as well as our intimate relationship to the consumerist framework, which drives such desires. While pharmaceutical developments offer cures, health benefits and the possibility to improve quality of life, the excess consumption of these technologies raises concerns, in my view.

The use of the medical reference in this research also serves as a way to comment on the ways in which complex problems are often approached in contemporary culture – with the simplicity of

a pill treatment. In 2009, for example, as a small-scale artistic experiment, I presented a multimedia performance piece entitled, "Consumerin[®]". The piece consists of a live sales pitch for a (fictitious) medication that stimulates consumers' buying habits in order to strengthen the health of the economy. The project serves as a satire of the notion of stimulating consumer spending in order to speed up economic recovery. (See portfolio1.pdf) "Consumerin[®]" was presented in the Perf09 International Performance Festival in Pori, Finland. The performance was also included in the Researcher's Day presentation organized by the Pori University Consortium.

"Consumerin[®]" employs fictitious advertising as a satirical tool, as well as surveys and audience interviews as a means to generate dialogue regarding personal effects of economic recession in Finland. Documentation from the Pori performance may be viewed here:

<http://vimeo.com/10428767>

Objectives

- Use public space in an innovative way to create dialogue and raise question regarding the nature of Finnish language acquisition and the experience of foreigners in Finland.
- Present a satirical critique of over-medicalization in the treatment of illness.

The following questions arise in this research:

- How can satire open up dialogue about issues of cultural integration in Finland?
- What role can performance and medicalization play, in the creation of a satirical framework for such dialogue?

The research uses artistic methods to works towards the goals above, to address political topics that may be better approached from various angles and multiple modes of thought. Along this thread, Teemu Mäki describes art as "an important philosophical force and medium" that "includes both the verbalizable and non-verbalizable". It is this combination of ways of thinking and expressing that makes art an effective way of testing out various entry points within socio-politically oriented research. As Mäki further explains: "...it makes sense to think of artworks not as illustrations or marketing devices of rationally verbalized philosophy and politics, but vice versa: as attempts at testing and molding [the] philosophical and political conviction in their full form." (Mäki, 2012)

This research draws on artistic methods from the performative, subversive, and absurdist traditions of the Dadaists, the Situationist International, and culture jammers such as the Yes Men and Adbusters. As in the works created by these groups, the satirical medical ads in my research aim to challenge the audience's assumptions towards current social issues by presenting periodic disruptions within systems of public space – in this case, within the mechanisms of medical advertising. The research also borrows visual methods from artists such as Dana Wyse, Damien Hirst and Justine Cooper, who have adopted the use of medical imagery in their work as a way to

satirically address the self-help and medical authority.

Creating a Space for Political Dialogue

On a secondary level, this artistic research seeks to create a space from which public dialogue can emerge in Finland, regarding language acquisition and cultural integration. With the internationalization of Finnish culture, there is a need for new spaces/platforms that offer both Finns and non-Finns the opportunity to share concerns and discussion regarding such socio-political topics. Traditionally, these venues take the form of commentary in news media, online forums, within panel discussions on YLE television or through such multicultural venues as Caisa. However, most of these formats may require certain levels of competency in the Finnish language, and thus may exclude a significant portion of the non-Finnish population from the discussion table.

Moreover, in contemporary culture there is growing activity in transient, generic areas which Marc Augé calls "non-places" (i.e. railway stations, shopping centers, hotels, airports) (Augé 2009). Though fleeting and seemingly superficial in nature, the type of communication found in these physical spaces creates meaning in our daily lives. Thus, I see a need to make better use of these areas that may offer a format for public dialogue, and the sharing of personal narratives. To this end, the research proposes a new form of public sphere, or at least an extension to the existing one.

The final art production for this research, entitled, "Finnexia[®]" addresses this need for international dialogue in Finland, and, using the framework of a satirical medical advertising pitch, presents an informal discussion format surrounding acquisition of the Finnish language. The project consists of a multimedia advertisement campaign for Finnexia[®], a (fictitious) medication that enhances the process of learning the Finnish language. The target audience for the product is primarily foreigners living in Finland, and newly arrived immigrants. A product promotion booth and dialogue table served as centerpieces of the performance. The Finnexia[®] presentation is meant to evoke an alternate reality that offers an innovative space for conversation about issues surrounding cultural integration and immigration in Finland. The visual format of pharmaceutical advertising in Finnexia[®] presents a commentary on the increasingly popular pill-popping approaches for treating a widening array of physical and mental ailments. In addition, the fictitious pharmacy and medical ads offer a double-edged investigation of medical aesthetics: a celebration of its characteristic professional slickness, clinical precision and soothing colors – as well as a critique of the limits created by the homogeneity of its form. Finnexia[®] was presented in September 2012 in the Helsinki Railway Station as the final doctoral thesis production. The Finnexia product website and medical animation may be viewed here: <http://www.finnexia.fi/>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fB2D8NJE-88>

References

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