

Iconic Turn – subversively

I

Christina Maria Pfeifer observes her Bavarian compatriot, Joseph Ratzinger, currently Pope, and shows how the man pales behind his own shadow and his stylish little slippers. She shows us the political leaders of the G8 nations, complete with German lady, doing a spot of digging, the military retreat in Georgia as a *danse macabre* with panzers, trucks and troop carriers and, in many variations, she conjures up before our eyes the hormone- controlled source of the European Union's milk lakes.

She uses few materials: cotton buds (preferably Japanese), a dozen or so shades of oil pastels, a steel nib, ink and photos cut out of daily newspapers and stuck onto card to make them less fragile to work on.

The lack of symmetry in the use of materials is immediately apparent to anyone familiar with the complicated production process behind today's press photos. True, the widespread use of digital technology for producing, transmitting and printing press photos has made everything much faster, and, on the surface at least, less complicated. On the other hand the changing function of the image ('Iconic turn') [0], running in parallel with and accelerating the advance of digitalisation, generates a tremendous effort in selecting, optimising and orchestrating those images, an effort brought into being by large in-house departments, external consultants and PR agencies in their work for companies, governments, parties and lobbies within society.

In other stations in her life Christina Maria Pfeifer has been able to observe this business close up. And she has perfected the use of the techniques it employs herself, as her '*Gedankenfilme*' demonstrate. So why, then, did she decide to tackle press photos? Why has she turned to the dying swan that is the daily press?

II

The changing function of press photos – evident for many years – from merely illustrating a text to being an information carrier *sui generis*, impacted with full force in the early 1980s, along with the revolution of market radicalism, embodied by Thatcher and Reagan. Reagan's media advisor, Michael Deaver, summed it up nicely at the time, pointing out that it was the picture that told the whole story, regardless of what Reagan said [1].

Of course this negation of the word, or logos, was only possible to this level of openness and radicalism because television and its electronic illusory images had become the dominant medium for dissemination. The Hollywood professional Ronald Reagan and the Californian armaments industry which invented him as a presidential candidate, exploited this to the full during his election campaign and also later when Reagan was in office.

The worldwide victory march of market radicalism, which is currently coming to an end in the world's second global economic crisis, was associated with a suppression of the word by the image. The intellectual flagships of highbrow journalism, *The Times* of London, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Le Monde*, *Corriere della Sera*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the *Wall Street Journal*, which deliberately held out against printing photos (except occasionally in special supplements) gradually started to publish images, black-and-white at first, later colour, on the front pages, to catch the eye. The 'iconic turn' caught them up, too – late but nevertheless with all its might.

After that there was no going back: Bush Senior, Reagan's successor in office, was beaten by a younger hero, Bill Clinton, not least because of the more attractive images. His successor, for whom words were always a challenge, relied completely on carefully presented and arranged images, including the one of him with the cardboard Thanksgiving turkey for his troops in Iraq. The terrible images from Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, the way they were staged a product of his own political decisions, will always remain shamefully linked with his name.

It is the sensory materiality of a printed newspaper, the fact that you can hold it in your hands, hear its pages rustle and smell the printer's ink that distinguish it and the press photo printed on it from the electronic image. This, too, must have been a factor in inspiring Christina Maria Pfeifer in her work: with tools like cotton buds and steel nibs you can exaggerate and hyper-exaggerate these expensively elaborated press 'photos' with much more lasting impact than is possible with moving images. Why does she do this? And what does it do?

III

Nowadays careful orchestration of media images is part of the day-to-day business of politics [2]. For politicians, mastery of this tool is an essential skill – in Europe, too, including Russia. The image politicians Putin, Sarkozy, Berlusconi, Blair – to name just the champions of political iconisation in Europe – have caused politics here, too, to move further and further away from the word.

Christina Maria Pfeifer deconstructs the media mogul Berlusconi as *Doctor Faustus* with the media Mephisto on his ear.

She has Bush, with eyes closed, dancing with a saint of dubious origin. Is it a dervish? Or some kind of nasty individual? Bin Laden, perhaps?

The picture of Putin's successor kissing the icon held out to him by two high Popes is turned into a play within a play, in which the body of state is travestied as an icon, and – hey presto – the icon mutates into the body of state.

She turns the iconographically staged press photos, produced with such effort and expense, into images that undermine the artifice and lay bare the iconisation.

Other, very different images are also created on top of the printed news photos. Pictures of misery, like the one of the mother and her six children fleeing in the Congo (*Exodus Mater*), depicted walking through the water, never to arrive anywhere. She holds the family together with only a very fine gauze.

The man in Cairo, made homeless by a landslide, whose government sends not helpers but soldiers – the man addresses them as if he were the Archangel Michael (*Mika'il in Cairo*), a figure known also in Islam, where he has emerald-green wings.

The most radical heightening is the (golden?) calf's head, set on the wrong way round and with his tongue stuck right out. It is the last reality particle left over from the dance of the demented on the virtual global financial markets.

Both the sophisticated deconstruction of the carefully orchestrated photographs and the radicalisation of the news pictures could be categorised as 'media criticism' or 'engaged art' or an attempt at 'political enlightenment'. But does this do these works justice? And if not, why not?

IV

The carefully arranged and presented press photos manipulated by Christina Maria Pfeifer are very thought-provoking, but still attractive enough to hang in your home. But there is something about them that provokes. Is it the motifs? The way she manipulates the images? Or their beauty?

This dilemma is perhaps clearest with the image *...and the show must go on*, in which horror and the feeling of horror is barely separable from aesthetic pleasure. Islamist (?) fighters (?) in combat boots pull back the red curtain for bulletproof-vested élite soldiers from the West in camouflage dress, and also wearing combat boots.

The press photo originally selected by Pfeifer for this artistic manipulation would have captured our interest for only a moment, if at all – we have seen this type of figure (too) often. Yet the image that Christina Maria Pfeifer has made out of the press photo, could it – removed from the current historical context – also attract our attention on an aesthetic level?

To ask this question is to answer 'no' to the question posed above, as to whether the images of Christina Maria Pfeifer are to be viewed as media criticism or engaged art.

For by manipulating the press images, which purport to depict "the reality" [3], she systematically steps beyond the real towards the possible, thereby gaining form and forms. It is precisely this which is the function of art, its specific contribution to society [4].

On the other hand it is the classic function of press photos as visual journalistic forms of presentation in media communication, of being a bridge between the public sphere and individual "impression-forming", which shapes the understanding of reality ("framing") [5]. This is why such effort goes into the staging for press photos, this is why we see an ever-growing proportion of images in print-media content and it is also why such frequent

and uninhibited use is made of the almost unlimited scope for manipulating images offered by digitalisation.

Of course, there has always been visual representation of power [6], even in the days before photography and printing. Many great art works were created this way and many great artists as a result remembered only for this. The job of the modern-day image producer is a much more extensive one. Whether and to what extent their productions can be classified as "artworks" which transcend the real, or as "simulacra" which plunge reality into agony [7], remains an open question.

With her manipulated press photos Christina Maria Pfeifer walks a fine line between manipulated reality and other possibilities. Is she, after all, an enlightener in disguise, a secret agitator, an *artiste engagée*?

V

If we assume that her art, as every art, is "a controlling of observations, also a controlling of the observations of others" [8], then every artist is an engaged artist – without the political connotation generally associated with this term.

Christina Maria Pfeifer is a *pictora docta*, who, we must assume, chooses her motifs with great thought and conviction, despite her evidently well developed play instinct. It is evidenced, too, in the way she confidently breaks through established boundaries in art, which explains probably why she is exhibiting at a gallery which is sympathetic to her in this.

As a notorious enlightener-Sisyphus, one is tempted to classify all her works, in particular her manipulated press photos, in a corresponding category. But that's not possible, thank God, because her art, with all its cotton buds, steel nibs and steely stubbornness, won't permit it. Art is free to alight on anything, even politics and press photos, when it chooses to take on the subject of "observing the unobservability of the world". [9]

With her pleasing, provocative, disturbingly manipulated press photos that were designed and published originally with the intention of guiding our world view, she says something about the unobservability of the world – charmingly and in deadly earnest, playfully but with great wisdom, as is her way and her art.

Volker Riegger, Prof. Universität der Künste Berlin; February 2009

From German into English by Ingrid Taylor

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Notes

- 0 W.J.T. Mitchell (1994), *Picture Theory* (University of Chicago Press), Chicago.
- 1 Heiko Ripper (1998), *Der Große Kommunikator. Die Medienstrategie Ronald Reagans im Kontext der US-Präsidenten* (Alber), Freiburg, Munich.
- 2 Moritz Ballensiefen (2009), *Bilder machen Sieger – Sieger machen Bilder* (VS), Wiesbaden.
- 3 Thomas Knieper and Marion G. Müller (eds) (2003), *Authenzität und Inszenierung von Bilderwelten* (Herbert von Halem), Cologne.
- 4 Niklas Luhmann (1990), *Weltkunst*, in: Niklas Luhmann, *Schriften zur Kunst und Literatur* (stw 1972), Frankfurt am Main, pp. 189-246.
- 5 *ibid*, Ballensiefen, p. 88.
- 6 Lutz Huth (2007), *Repräsentative Personen*, in: Lutz Huth und Michael-Krzeminski (eds), *Repräsentation in Politik, Medien und Gesellschaft* (Königshausen&Neumann), Würzburg, pp. 213-249.
- 7 Jean Baudrillard (2007), *Pourquoi tout n'a-t-il pas déjà disparu?* (Les Éditions de l'Herne), Paris.
- 8 Niklas Luhmann (1990), *Ein Gespräch über Kunst*, in: Niklas Luhmann, Frederick D. Bunsen, Dirk Baecker, *Unbeobachtbarkeit der Welt* (Cordula Haux), Bielefeld, p. 59.
- 9 Niklas Luhmann (1993), *Die Evolution des Kunstsystems*, in: Niklas Luhmann, *Schriften zur Kunst und Literatur* (stw 1972), Frankfurt am Main, pp. 258-276.