Dealing with A Difficult Relationship

In many ways, the media reports analyzing the unfolding situation in and around Ukraine highlight the problems of any dramatic and unstable relationship. Anyone outside of the region trying to educate themselves on the issue finds it difficult, because of the lack of a shared language, which creates an information and communication barrier. There is also a very disparate Russia and Ukraine from the West, and much of the rest of the world. All these things need to be considered. Most major media outlets and journalists do not seem to be helping the case around miscommunication and miscommunication. They fuel the spectacle by reporting in a manner that is demanded (and welcomed) by their audiences, and not necessarily with the aim of generating a balanced discussion. Unfortunately, these media spectacles can result in a real war.

Whoever Controls the Media Controls the Mind?

The situation of reporting about Russia, Ukraine and the Crimea, highlight the short-comings of the mainstream media, and the need for reliable alternative sources of information, particularly for Russia and post-Soviet spaces. The coverage of the 2014 Sochi Olympics was an example of poor journalism resulting in a media spectacle, with reporters dwelling on shortcomings and making fun of situations they were unacustom ed to. These misunderstandings, while somewhat understandable, are not excusable. In the last year we have witnessed shutdowns of non-state media outlets in Russia, but people’s voices are still accessible on the internet and through social media. Not long after the Olympics, media coverage began of the situation in Ukraine and then in Crimea—both of which are extremely complicated—but are once again being understood only in extremes. There is little balanced discussion, and a lot of misinformation based on the original Cold War and its sentiments.

Beyond Propaganda—What is ‘Good’ Information?

An op-ed in The Moscow Times suggested that this information war and lack of quality information is the fault of the mass media, which does not choose to speak to academi cians or experts with balanced opinions, but only extremists who fit the sensationalized desire for shocking news. And we agree. In such an emotionally charged situation, issues are being amplified by the media on both sides. Not just online, but also offline. The lack of quality information and discussions being communicated help to fuel and represent World War III—an information war, based on who controls the media and how they manipulate it. This, however, also presents an opportunity for independent voices to be heard, and we hope to fill this space. But so far, it has only brought out extremes in the form of patriots and dissidents. No one likes to hear discussions that are reasonable, and to be heard means to take an extreme position. Perhaps this is an unfortunate reality of our times. The emotional tension caused by the situation is reflected even on social media platforms like Facebook, where people began removing friends who disagreed with their opinions. We think that people need to stop consuming propaganda and be encouraged to think critically about the information they are being presented with. And while it is easy, it is not enough to blame just one person (Putin) for a complex situation at the intersection of historic, cultural, political and media ecologies. The best we can (and should) try to do is reflect, discuss, and use our own actions as a means for change. Hopefully, people will focus on their ability to think / act critically and independently, despite a media and propaganda dominated world. We hope, with this series, that we can create an alternative source of information and balanced discussions on the issue.

Irony Curtain: Miscommunication and Media Wars

Do you consider yourself a pioneer in street art and urban interventions?

When I started in the mid-eighties there was no ‘street art’ movement. I knew the work of Keith Haring— ‘subway drawings’, using unused advertisement spaces in the subway—and the work of Charles Simonds, who made miniature clay dwellings in cracked walls of condemned buildings in New York in the seventies. They both made temporary, fragile outdoor pieces, on their own initiative. I liked that.

If you want to ‘include’ everybody, that means communicate with everybody in the streets, you cannot use the language of art, because they don’t know it and feel threatened by it. Therefore I chose to use only signs, language, objects, actions etc. that already exists in our cities, but ‘contextualise’ them by placing them ‘wrongly’ in a new location to create meaning that way. And at the same time formulate a new view of what art could be. From the end of the 80s I left a trail of anonymous and illegal interventions behind in cities all over the world.

What do you think of the trajectory of street art or urban interventions being incorpo rated into galleries?

I’m interested in ‘public space’, so I judge ‘street art’ on how it relates to the passer-by: where is it placed and what does it try to achieve? I prefer ‘street art’ that tries to communicate certain social and philosophical ideas to the general public, but also when it is just meant to be decorative (for example Kristyan Gzlipicki), you can still judge whether it works well on that location, or not. There are also a lot of artists (for example Filippo Minelli) who make things outdoors just to take a photograph of their interventions to show in a gallery (or on the internet or in books). I’m not really interested in that kind of work. I really want the work to function out there in the streets!

Do you think street art has the potential to transform public spaces and cities?

I do not think that the aim should be to ‘transform’ public spaces. I think that the role of street art is to ‘comment’ on issues in public space from the viewpoint of the individual—the citizen without power, you & me—so it should act as a parasite or a virus. I am not a big fan of community projects, where the goal is ‘to bring people together and make the neighborhood more beautiful’. I am more interested in a critical position.

In Conversation with Harmen de Hoop

For almost three decades, Dutch artist Harmen de Hoop has anonymously but consistently been intervening in public space. Whether critical or joking, he has made his ideas felt in cities around the world. This is a brief conversation with the artist—the original urban interventionist.

You also had graffiti, but that was more ‘graphic design’ than ‘art’. And I could mention Daniel Buren, but his work was more related to the discourse within the gallery- museum-art- system, even when it was placed outdoors. For me, the important thing was that making another installation in a ‘white cube’ seemed boring, so I was looking for a new adventure. And after deciding that making things in public space and addressing the casual passer-by instead of an informed art audience was more exciting, I had to make up new rules.

You also had ‘engagement’, as a parasite or a virus. I am not a ‘comment’ artist; I am more interested in ‘public space’, so I judge ‘street art’ on how it relates to the passer-by: where is it placed and what does it try to achieve? I prefer ‘street art’ that tries to communicate certain social and philosophical ideas to the general public, but also when it is just meant to be decorative (for example Kristyan Gzlipicki), you can still judge whether it works well on that location, or not. There are also a lot of artists (for example Filippo Minelli) who make things outdoors just to take a photograph of their interventions to show in a gallery (or on the internet or in books). I’m not really interested in that kind of work. I really want the work to function out there in the streets!

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