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## *Untitled*

### **Jean Baudrillard**

Like Utopia, all the utopias of the XIX and XX centuries, by becoming real, have driven reality from reality, leaving us in a hyperreality devoid of meaning, because meaning and the finality of reality have become absorbed and digested. The only residue of reality is a surface without depth, but with an intense superficial energy that suffices to propel the fragments of reality into a different orbit. No one knows what mysterious gravitational pull still links the scattered fragments of reality. Perhaps technology alone preserves a constellation of meaning and reality. By the same token, irony has passed into things. It is no longer a critical function, a mirror reflecting the uncertainty, the probable absurdity of the world. Today, irony is inherent in things, it has become an objective irony. The instant things become man-made products, artifacts, signs, commodities, they perform an artificial and ironic function by their very existence, whose origin is transparent. We no longer have to project irony into a natural world; we no longer need an external mirror that offers the world the image of its double. Our universe has swallowed its double. It has therefore become spectral, transparent. And the irony of this embodied double bursts out continually, in every parcel of our signs, in every detail of our models. We no longer have to do what the surrealists did: juxtapose objects with the absurdity of their functions, in a poetic unreality. Objects now take it upon themselves to become clear ironically, all by themselves. Things discard their meaning effortlessly. We no longer have to underscore artifice or nonsense; they are part of the very depiction of things, part of their visibility.

Today, all things are doomed to appearance. Having no origin and deriving from a few general modes, things have no secret. They are condemned to publicity, to making themselves believable, to being seen and promoted. Our modern world is one of publicity in its very essence (or rather in its transparency). One would think it was invented solely to be publicized in a different world. We should not believe that publicity came *after* commodities. In the very heart of merchandise (and, by extension, in the very heart of our entire universe of signs), there is an *evil genius of advertising*, a trickster, who has integrated the buffoonery of merchandise with its *mise-en-scène*, its staging. An ingenious scriptwriter (perhaps capital itself) has pulled the world into a phantasmagoria, and we are all its spellbound victims. Today, all things want to be manifested. Technological, industrial, and media objects, indeed, all sorts of artifacts, even natural objects, wish to signify, to be seen, read, recorded, photographed. You only think you are photographing a scene or a landscape. In fact, the scene or landscape wishes to be photographed. It determines you; you are merely a supernumerary in its staging, secretly moved by the self-publicizing perversion of the surrounding world. That is the irony - I might almost be tempted to say the *pataphysical* irony - of the situation. Metaphysics is actually swept away by this reversal of the situation: the subject is no longer at the origin of the process; it is merely the agent of the objective irony of the world. Barbara Kruger might offer «I'LL NOT BE YOUR MIRROR» as the epitaph for this veritable subversion of the traditional universe,

for this new order, or ironic disorder, of things. WE WILL NO LONGER BE YOUR FAVORITE DISAPPEARING ACT. A defensive statement, which, like nearly all of Barbara Kruger's utterances, I would personally rather shift into offensive terms: YOU WILL BE OUR FAVORITE DISAPPEARING ACT! YOU WILL BE OUR MIRROR. This would illustrate the ironic and triumphant revenge of the object rather than the unfortunate revolt of the subject.

But this is only a manner of speaking. The message conveyed by these images is never a true message. Luckily for us, I might add. For if the weight of the words were to be added to the shock of the photos, the totality would be a semantically unbearable redundancy. Hence, text and photo designate one another ironically. Behind these images there are overtones of Magritte's formula: «Ceci n'est pas une pipe» (This is not a pipe). The text says, «This photo is not a photo», but at the same time the photo says, «This text is not a message». This means what it means, but this (the political, feminist, ideological message) cannot be made to speak unless it is isolated from the whole, and that would be unfair and dishonest. For we would then have nothing but naive prophecies or banal stereotypes. The singularity of these images is that the text (which we seize upon first, in accordance with an old mental tradition of reading) is instantly short-circuited by the image, which, for its part, cannot help ceasing to impose itself as total visual evidence or as truth because it is intercepted and diverted by the text. Neither is the key to the other. The text and the photo function together in order to produce a real image - not by mutual reinforcement but by annulling and foiling one another. It is the internal irony, the subtle contradiction slipping in among the elements of the montage, that makes the montage aesthetically readable. And it is the dis-accumulation, not the accumulation, of meanings that makes us accomplices of the image. Incidentally, this irony is sharpened by the almost surrealistic exorbitance of the montage.

In all these images, the photo and the message are exaggerated, making the images seem like scholarly or medical panels designed to explain the physiology or pathology of a society to the children, the handicapped, or the deaf-mutes of ideology. They are almost tactile images for the blind. No doubt this reveals that we have truly become societies with a weak ideological sensibility, a weak capacity for reading - societies diminished in meaning and in the perception of meaning, handicapped with regard to meaning. Hence, we can alert minds not with subtle hieroglyphs but with Mad Ave hieroglyphs, whose overblown nature exposes our situation. Likewise, the continual admonishment by means of the YOU, the WE, the I, the categorical imperative of the personal pronoun, exposes a society with a weak identity. The YOU, the I, the WE are designated only by an antiphrasis, which in itself is violently ironic because it addresses authorities that are now disappearing. I do not believe that these images create a collective mobilization or awareness. If they had such a political goal, they would be naive (as naive as advertising when it believes it is delivering a message, whereas nowadays any text whatsoever is read *as an image*). These images create not an ideological depth but an ironic depth, by means of the injunction of the YOU and its repetition, which actually emphasize the absence of the other, of the interlocutor - or at least his problematical presence. This is the litany of a society of communication which does not *itself* communicate, in which the medium exists, all media exist, but not a single message can be deciphered collectively. Or rather, all messages exist, fully available, but there is no one at the other end of the sign. A society in which one desperately tries to speak to someone - but who?

That is how I would interpret this vehement feminine addressing of the masculine, or vehement interpellation of power, all powers that be: I AM YOUR IMMACULATE CONCEPTION. WE ARE YOUR CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE. For does something masculine still exist to answer, does any power still exist to reply? Is there still enough of a sexual difference for antagonistic communication to exist? And what good can it do to make the masculine admit - when it no longer has the strength - that it is the masculine? The masculine can respond only by

vanishing, which it has already done. And then what? By the same token, is there still such a thing as a power relationship, a political contradiction strong enough to produce a radical and antagonistic challenge to power? And what advantage could there be in forcing power to admit that it is power at the very moment when it no longer has the means or political energy?

Thus the virtue of these images resides, no doubt, not in political demystification or provocation but in designating the absence of either the virtual antagonist or the masses and thereby underlining the unreality of our state of things. By exaggerating the recipient's goal, these images reflect the unconsummated marriage of communication, the blank writing of a politics of the image. That is why the medium decomposes into a montage; the medium itself no longer believes in the true coherence of its own message. This does not make it lose all its power. It maintains its superior power of irony, and it bears witness to its rage to signify even when there is nothing left to say. THE MEDIUM IS BEAUTIFUL.

Another thing I like about these images (images?) is their virtual relationship to the surrounding space. One can image them in just about any size: miniaturized as decals or stencils or graffiti (they could even be turned into postcards), or blown up as posters or enormous billboards in the heart of a city or sky writing on a screen of clouds. Or, of course, one can imagine them in a gallery or museum. But even in such an exhibition they would denote all other sizes. They are actually mobile orbital images meant to describe space (including interior space) rather than to occupy the fixed space of conventional art. They no longer have the constraints of the (aesthetic) proscenium; instead, they have the new freedom of the movie screen. They cannot be isolated from one another; they form a chain reaction. They are like a continuous *orbit* of reflecting panels that mirror our «exorbitant» modern condition. They disengage themselves from a frame line, from any rigorous localizing, as well as from the determined mode of vision that is part of the aesthetic definition of art (which still exercises great control over our present-day depictions). Now, at last, they regain something of the strength and immediacy of forms before, or after, the aestheticization of our culture. One can see them either as advertising, pure and simple, as advertising images that are *almost* superficial and stereotypical, or as quasiprimitive masks that, beyond their aesthetic quality (which is only attributed to them subsequently, or which they never attain), live from the intensity of the phantasms or exorcisms they induce. Just like masks, these images perform a kind of exorcism on our society. Like masks, which absorb the identities of actors, dancers, and spectators, and whose function is thereby to provoke something like a thaumaturgic (traumaturgic) vertigo, I believe that these images have a force and function to absorb the interlocutor (YOU) and send him reeling, rather than to communicate. Somewhat like those fascinating faces for which the written text would be their eyes and gaze - absorption and rejection, exactly as in exorcistic and paroxysmal forms. Kruger's images thus completely reflect the society we live in - a society of paroxysm and exorcism, that is, a society in which we have absorbed our own reality and our own identity to a dizzying degree and now try to reject them forcefully, a society in which all reality has absorbed its double to a dizzying degree and now tries to expel it in all its forms.

(In *Barbara Kruger*, Mary Baone and Michael Werner Gallery, New York 1987).